

Women in Islam

Challenging Narratives

Ismail Adam Patel

In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

And among His signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts) : Verily in that are signs for those who reflect. And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variation in your languages and your colours: Verily in that are signs for those who know.

[*al-Rūm* 30:21-2]

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INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

During this era of the 'War on Terror', one might have expected people in the West to be repulsed from the Islamic faith. Yet, in truth, statistics reveal that Islam remains the fastest growing religion on the planet. While it is true that much of this is reflected by higher birth rates within Muslim families, the rate at which people, especially women, are converting to the religion is also astounding. This very fact defies the logic with which many predominantly Muslim lands have been attacked under the guise of freeing Muslim women from oppression.

I was originally inspired to write on this subject after reading an article in a British broadsheet which stated that seven out of ten reverts to Islam were women. Today, despite the vilification of Islam, as *The Almanac Book of Facts* (2005) indicates, for every one male there are four female converts to Islam in the USA.

Historically, women have been attracted to Islam for many reasons. More recently, the spotlight on Islam has led many in the West to search for themselves the truth behind

the headlines. This journey has pleasantly surprised and attracted many to the reality of the Islamic faith which seeks the middle path, welcomes research and challenges the inquiring mind. Islam has become the alternative to the capitalist, globalised world which rewards greed and individualism.

Some critics from the right wing media have accused me of undermining women in the West by quoting statistics relating to the issues that affect them. These statistics are intended to simply highlight the reality of what is happening to women in the assumed free world and let individuals decide whether reform at a societal level is needed to protect women, ensure their rights are not infringed and perhaps relieve women from the burden they face in having to 'make it' in the man's world while simultaneously being obliged to exhibit all the feminine characteristics which are determined, judged and imposed by men.

The most rewarding letters I received after the publication of the first edition of this book were from women who were inspired by and convinced of the positive contribution of Islam in their lives after having read the book. My initial and persistent intention is to highlight the challenges faced by women in the western world and thereafter direct both Muslims and non-Muslims towards bringing the teachings of Islam regarding the rights of women to the fore to facilitate dynamic debate that will, I hope, help usher in a more equitable existence for both genders.

It should be stated at the outset that there can be little doubt about the comparable statistics on rape, single par-

ent families, mental illnesses and pregnancies outside marriage in Muslim majority countries which are as appalling as they are in the West. However, these are not the states that I am modeling the Islamic position on, as many of these countries are driven by a capitalist ideal rather than by the Islamic ethos. My references to Islamic principles in this book refer to that which is preached by the religion of Islam which are forgotten by many in the world. These principles are no longer espoused in many Muslim countries and a return is desperately needed in order to redress the many factors that have left women in an inequitable position.

I hope this book will raise in the minds of the readers the concepts and parameters of success, equality and freedom for women that are considered by the western mindset so that he/she is able to challenge them. Even those who do not incline towards the natural path of Islam will have concerns regarding the economic, legal and social position of women in the West. Islam may not be the choice for everyone but its teachings presents a more equitable alternative for all.

In this second edition, the title of this book has been modified to give it greater focus, but it remains largely true to the original book titled *Islam, the Choice of Thinking Women*. Minor changes are introduced, the statistics have been updated and obvious errors corrected. This book is merely an introduction to some of the major issues regarding women in Islam. I hope that others will be inspired to improve upon my effort.

Ismail Adam Patel

INTRODUCTION

I am a Muslim, a fact which I must make clear to the reader from the outset, for this book seeks to clarify what is arguably the most frequently discussed aspect of my faith: the position of women in Islam. In doing so, I wish to take this matter beyond the usual defence of Islam and seek a positive understanding of why women are embracing Islam in increasing numbers. I will also examine the role of feminism in today's world.

For too long, Muslims have had to face the criticism that their faith is 'irrational'. Islam and Muslim women in particular, continue to be subjected to ridicule and mockery throughout the western world. And in all of this, the media plays a key role.

Nevertheless, Islam remains the fastest-growing religion in the world. In Europe and North America, the progress of Islam is well documented in census reports. Moreover, it is reported that out of every ten 'new' Muslims, seven are women.¹ Why do individuals, especially women, accept Islam when they are constantly bombarded with inaccurate

'information' about this faith? The simple answer is that human beings submit to the Creator of the Universe when the light of truth shines in their souls. Their transformation then transcends materialistic, worldly obstacles and brings about for them serenity, contentment, and inner peace.

It is a common error to treat Islam as a mere 'religion', in the sense that it only defines belief in Allah ﷻ, or prescribes certain acts of worship to be performed or rules to be complied with. In fact, Islam is much more than a 'religion' in this narrow sense. Islam is a *Dīn*, a complete way of life which encompasses every aspect of life, from the 'religious' to the social, economic, medical and political.

The core of Islam is *Tawḥīd*. No matter how uneducated, remote or isolated a Muslim might be, *Tawḥīd* is the focus of his or her belief. This firm and unequivocal belief in the absolute oneness and uniqueness of Allah ﷻ, the Lord and Creator of all, is the very essence of Islam. Belief in *Tawḥīd* affirms that there is only One Creator and Sustainer Who deserves to be worshipped and obeyed. The message is clear:

Say: He is Allah, the One and Only; Allah, the Eternal, Absolute; He begets not, nor is He begotten; And there is none like unto Him. [al-Ikhlāṣ 112:1-4]

Allah is He, other than Whom there is no other Allah - Who knows (all things) both secret and open; He, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. Allah is He, other than Whom there is no other

Allah - the Sovereign, the Holy One, the Source of Peace (and Perfection), the Guardian of Faith, the Preserver of Safety, the Exalted in Might, the Irresistible, the Supreme: Glory to Allah! (High is He) above the partners they attribute to Him. He is Allah, the Evolver, the Bestower of Forms (or Colours). To Him belong the Most Beautiful Names: whatever is in the heavens and on earth, declares His Praises and Glory, and He is the Exalted in Might, the Wise. [al-Hashr 59:22-24]

Allah! There is no god but He - the Living, the Self-subsisting, Eternal. No slumber can seize Him nor sleep. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is there that can intercede in His presence except as He permits? He knows what (appears to His creatures as) Before or After or Behind them. Nor shall they compass aught of His knowledge except as He wills. His Throne extends over the heavens and the earth, and He feels no fatigue in guarding and preserving them for He is the Most High, the Supreme (in glory). [al-Baqarah 2:255]

The individual's voluntary submission to Allah ﷻ through sincere adherence to *Tawḥīd* brings freedom from worldly, materialistic shackles, and raises the Muslim, the one who submits to the will of Allah ﷻ, to a higher spiritual realm. This submission liberates individuals from false worship, whether it be of the occult, money, fortune-telling, material gods, self-conceit, arrogance or from those who pretentiously claim to be intermediaries acting on behalf of Allah ﷻ. This submission also frees Muslims from the burden of social and peer pressure, as they only submit to the will of Allah ﷻ, and to nothing and no-one else. Submission to the will of Allah ﷻ provides the Muslim

with a positive identity and definite position in relation to his or her fellow Muslims, other human beings and the rest of creation. Moreover, it grants him or her direct access to Allah ﷻ, the Creator of all.

A Muslim who has freely accepted Islam thus submits to the will of Allah ﷻ and obeys His commandments. Human beings know about these commandments through *Risālah* (Prophethood): Allah ﷻ has sent His Guidance through chosen people who are called Prophets or Messengers, who conveyed Allah's message to their fellow humans. The chain of Prophethood began with Adam and continued through numerous Prophets, including Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and Jesus, and culminated in the Prophethood of Muḥammad (may peace be upon all the Prophets and Messengers of Allah). Some Prophets were given books of guidance, such as the Torah of Moses, the Gospel of Jesus and the Qur'ān brought by Muḥammad ﷺ.² The Qur'ān is the final book of guidance revealed by Allah ﷻ to mankind, and it supersedes and encompasses all previous scriptures. The Qur'ān is the only scripture that has remained in its original form since its revelation fourteen hundred years ago. The Holy Qur'ān itself states:

Alif, Lam, Mim. Allah! There is no god but He – the Living, the Self-subsisting, Eternal. It is He Who sent down to you (step by step) in truth, the Book, confirming what went before it; and He sent down the Law (of Moses) and the Gospel (of Jesus) Before this, as a guide to mankind, and He sent

down the Criterion (of judgement between right and wrong). Then those who reject faith in the Signs of Allah will suffer the severest penalty, and Allah is Exalted in Might, Lord of Retribution. From Allah, verily nothing is hidden on earth or in the heavens. He it is Who shapes you in the wombs as He pleases. There is no god but He, the Exalted in Might, the Wise. [Āl 'Imrān 3:1-6]

The faith of Islam is derived from the Holy Qur'ān and the teachings, example and practices of Allah's final Messenger, the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ, which are collectively known as his Sunnah. Every minute detail of the Prophet's life, conduct and statements were memorised by his Companions, who put his example into practice and passed on reports of what they had seen him do or heard him say to subsequent generations. These reports or *aḥādīth* (sing. *ḥadīth*) were later subjected to intense scrutiny by scholars who recorded and classified them into different degrees of 'soundness' or authenticity. The greatest recorder of *aḥādīth* was Imām al-Bukhārī, who spent sixteen years compiling reports of the Prophet's words and deeds in his famous collection of *aḥādīth*, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.³

It is the straightforward presentation of Islam; its practical application, sincere teachings and equal treatment of all that have attracted multitudes of people towards the teachings of the words of Allah ﷻ.

The rapid spread of Islam in the western world has driven some to publish alarmist statistics and even issue safe-

guard plans against being indoctrinated by Islam. Right wing xenophobes have used elements of the media to spearhead an unrelenting attack on Islam in general and have specifically attempted to portray a distorted image of women in Islam in order to convince the world at large that Islam 'oppresses' women. But this campaign seems not to be working, because seven out of every ten Western converts to Islam are women. Within the last decade, an estimated ten thousand British women have accepted Islam and are practising it. Most of the new converts are middle class, well-educated individuals with professional backgrounds.

In order to fully appreciate the role that Islam continues to play in liberating women from cultural oppression which is perpetrated in the name of 'freedom,' it is necessary to look at women's status through the ages in various cultures and civilisations. I start with an overview of the period prior to the advent of Islam. The second chapter presents the depressing picture of the plight of women who have espoused the *laissez-faire* culture of the West. Anyone with the slightest concern for humanity and the social welfare of human beings will be greatly perturbed by some of the calamities faced by women in this supposedly advanced West. I then turn to the teachings of the Qur'ān and the Prophet ﷺ on the role, position, rights and integrity of women in Islam.

No book which deals with the issue of women can ignore the aspirations of the feminist movement, so I have

included a discussion on feminist theories. I have sought to examine their practical application in the light of Islamic teachings.

I hope that the readers will gain a deeper insight into the position of women in Islam, and assess how Islamic principles can be employed to help alleviate some of the problems facing the 'modern' society.

Notes

1. *The Times*, London, 7 January 1994.
2. Peace and blessing of Allah be upon the Prophet.
3. Imām al-Bukhārī was born in 194 AH (c. 800 CE), demonstrated from a very early age great zeal, knowledge, and an incredible memory. He travelled across the newly expanded Islamic state, from Egypt to Persia and from the Caucasus to the southern tip of Arabia in order to verify the authenticity of *aḥādīth*. He was so strict in his criteria regarding the *isnād* (chain of narrators) that if he had even a single doubt concerning a *ḥadīth*, it would be omitted from his collection. Imām al-Ḥākim states that Imām al-Bukhārī laid down the following conditions for including a *ḥadīth* in his collection: from every Prophetic Companion (*Ṣaḥābī*), at least two followers of the Companions (*Tābi'īn*) should have reported it; and at least two persons who were trustworthy, just and qualified according to the criteria for narrating *aḥādīth* should have narrated it from each *Tābi'ī*. In this way, the chain of narrators up to Imām al-Bukhārī should be unbroken. The Imām listened to the narrations of 1080 persons and collected over 300,000 *aḥādīth*; and he himself memorized nearly 200,000 reports, and after applying his stringent criteria, he recorded only 7275 as rigorously authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) in his book. As a result, there is no doubt about the authenticity of the reports recorded in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Not content with this great achievement, Imām al-Bukhārī also compiled an extremely important study on the life of the transmitters of *aḥādīth*, called *al-Tārīkh al-Kabīr* (The Great

History). Imām al-Bukhārī set a precedent for stringent criteria in recording the Prophetic traditions, so much so that its study has become a science in its own right. He always turned to God for guidance, and it is reported that no *ḥadīth* was recorded until he had performed ablution and prayed two units of prayer. In order to avoid the possibility of social pressures and corruption, Imām al-Bukhārī kept away from the company of the princes and sultans of his day.

I

WOMEN – A CROSS CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

What Islam has achieved for women's emancipation and equality is far greater than many people in the West care to admit or appreciate. Judging Islam with the West's experience of Christianity, some individuals tend to denounce the way of life chosen by Allah ﷻ for woman and man, without knowing or fully understanding what they are really denouncing. It was only Islam that lifted women from the abyss of oppression to previously unknown levels of freedom and respectability. If viewed objectively, it can be argued that women have achieved within Islam levels of liberation unmatched even in today's 'civilized' world.

Greek and Roman Civilizations

Prior to the advent of the Qur'ān, in the period known as *jāhiliyyah* or 'ignorance', women in many cultures throughout the world were considered little more than commodities and objects of desire to be bought and sold like livestock. The Romans did not regard women as equal to men before the law. Women in Roman society received only a basic

education, if at all, and were subjected to the authority of men. Traditionally, the men who instructed them before marriage were their fathers. After marriage, the authority switched to their husbands, who also held non-negotiable legal rights over their children.¹ In commerce, it was also the men who made decisions and took responsibility for any transactions. Men punished their wives and children as they saw fit and the women had no recourse to the law due to abusive behaviour. Men were able to divorce or in extreme cases even kill their wives with flimsy excuses. The men also had absolute control over their children to the extent that they could sell them into slavery if they so wished.

The Greek philosophers either reflected upon or reinforced the subordinate position of females. Aristotle, for example, wrote: "... We may thus conclude that it is a natural law that there should be naturally ruling elements and elements naturally ruled ... The rule of the freeman over the slave is one kind of rule; that of the male over the female another... The slave is entirely without the faculty of deliberation; the female indeed possesses it, but it is a form which remains inconclusive."²

The Greeks ranked women at the third (lowest) level of society. If a woman gave birth to a deformed child, it was common practice to kill her. In Sparta, which is acknowledged as an elite society, a woman who could no longer bear children was put to death. The Spartans also took women away from their husbands to be inseminated

by the 'brave and strong men' of other communities. The Greeks in general considered women to be insignificant creatures who could not be dear to the 'gods'.

Hippolytus' invective against women, in the tragedy written by Euripides, sums up the Greek view:

"O Zeus, whatever possessed you to put an ambiguous misfortune amongst men by bringing women to the light of day? If you really wanted to sow the race of mortals, why did it have to be born of women? How much better it would be if men could buy the seed of sons without paying for it with gold, iron or bronze in your temples, and could live free, without women in their houses."³

Judaism

Orthodox Jews who subscribe to the traditional teachings of Judaism have come under attack from within because some of their beliefs and practices are considered sexually oppressive. The *Talmud*, a book pertaining to the Jewish civil and ceremonial law, states, "It is impossible for there to be a world without males and females. Nevertheless happy is the man whose children are males and woe to the man whose children are females."⁴

Superiority of the male child is further emphasised by several customs. On the birth of a male child the parents invite guests to a *Kiddush*, a celebratory meal after the Sabbath. There exists no such custom after the birth of a female child. In education, it is not considered appropriate

to educate the females beyond what is necessary, and what is necessary to know are the practices ordained in the Jewish scriptures for women.⁵ When a boy reaches adulthood his maturity is further celebrated by a ritual called, *bar mitzvah*, 'son of the commandment.' The boy who has now become a man can be counted to make up a quorum, *minyan*, which is needed for certain prayers and for public worship in the synagogue, for which ten free male adults are required. A woman, on the other hand, cannot be counted to make up a quorum (*minyan*).⁶ There were no parallel celebrations for women in Jewish custom. The inequality and injunctions towards women are further found in the law relating to divorce. A woman has no right of divorce. Even if her husband disappears without a trace, without the evidence of his death, she cannot remarry.⁷ Only the man has the right of divorce, and many men have abused this right by abandoning their wives without divorcing them to prevent them from remarrying.

According to Le Bonn, the male Orthodox Jew solemnly recites, "Blessed art Thou, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, that I was not born a female." The inequalities stemming from Jewish scriptures and tradition are coming under pressure from within to make changes for a greater equitability. There has been a recent introduction of the celebration of girls attaining puberty called *bat mitzvah* (compared with the celebration offered for boys called *bar mitzvah*). In education, despite the ruling of the *Zohar* that the teaching of the *Torah* was meant only for males,⁸ the religious education of Jewish females has become an

established norm. In divorce, today the Judaic law has made some accommodation so that couples can first turn to the state courts for separation and then gain a religious divorce later.

Hinduism

Women in Hinduism fared little better than in other belief systems. In Hinduism, the perfect woman is the *pativrata*, the devoted wife whose entire existence is dedicated to her husband. The very word *pativrata* says it all: "she whose vow (*vrata*) is to her husband (*pati*)."⁹ During her lifetime, the good Hindu wife is expected to regard her husband as her own personal god, for the man ordained to be a woman's husband is viewed as far more than a man: he is the incarnation of the supreme law in her life, the definition and summation of her religious duty. After a blameless life, such a woman should ideally die before her husband. In the traditional cultures, a woman who outlived her husband would often be expected to take her own life on her husband's funeral pyre. This horrific rite, known as *satee*, was until very recently still being practised in India by some orthodox Hindus, and the government had to intervene to abolish it. Nevertheless, for devout Hindus a woman who is *satee* is worshipped as a goddess, the perfect example of the self-sacrificing wife.⁹

A book on the ancient discipline of Sanskrit religious law, *Draramasastra*, includes a chapter on "the religious status and duties of women," *stridharmapaddhati*. The author (or, more accurately, the compiler) of this work, Tryambaka, was an orthodox pandit living in Thanjavur, in what is now

the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The ruling on women generally places them at the level of subordinate citizens. A wife, according to this book, has no right over her husband's property. Property owned jointly by the wife and husband may be disposed of by the husband, but the wife needs his permission to do the same. Even with property that is specific to women, such as gifts from her husband or her own family, she still needs her husband's permission to exercise her rights of ownership.

Tryambaka's stark message is defined in three ways. Firstly, a wife should have no regard for her own life. Secondly, she should even allow herself to be sold, if her husband should wish it. Thirdly, obedience to her husband takes precedence over all other duties, including religious ones. In a nutshell, this law contains only one point: that a woman's highest duty is to her husband alone.¹⁰

Pre-Islamic Arabia

In pre-Islamic Arabia, the Arabs treated women with contempt. It was customary for infant girls to be buried alive at birth. Men could have as many wives as they wished, and all were effectively treated like slaves, and would be inherited as possessions when their husbands died. The eldest son or other close relatives of a deceased husband had the right to possess his widow or widows, marrying them himself if he so desired.

Before and during the time of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ, Persia was ruled by the Sassanids who professed Zoroas-

trianism. Their faith demanded total obedience of the wife to the husband. A wife was required to declare, "I will never cease, all my life, to obey my husband." Failure to do so would lead to divorce. A wife had no say in any matters and her husband could lend her, for a fee, to others. If a woman did not produce any children, she would be abandoned, if she was lucky; more often than not a barren wife would be killed.

Europe

Britain and most of Europe, in the same period, was just recovering from a long Roman occupation which was followed by the arrival of Christianity. European society was fragmented; tribal wars and kingly struggles to gain control over land and people were commonplace. With very few exceptions, women had little or no active role to play.¹¹ In the same period that Islam was emerging, the French passed a resolution around 586 CE, after great deliberation and controversy, declaring that women can be classified as human beings but are nevertheless created for the sole purpose of serving man.¹²

Christianity

The term 'Christianity' covers various beliefs and practices, as one commentator put it, "Christianity is always adapting itself into that which is believable". The apparent flexibility of this religion creates problems for discussions, since it is easy for anyone to counter any claims about Christianity with the latest amended pronouncements of the Vatican, Anglican Synod, or of some other Churches.

The broad nature of Christian divisions must also be kept in mind: what holds true in one denomination, such as the Church of England (Anglicanism), may not be true in another, such as Roman Catholicism. Nevertheless, if we look at the supposed sources of Christianity, the Old and New Testaments, and the scholarly works produced elsewhere, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that women have been, over the centuries, treated deplorably by the Church.

According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Christianity did not bring a revolutionary social change to the position of women." Indeed, "in the world of the early church, women were held in very low esteem, and this was the basis for divorce practices that put women practically at men's complete disposal." This is in keeping with the "Old Testament view of marriage as an institution primarily concerned with the establishment of a family, rather than sustaining the individual happiness of the marriage partners," a view which has "strongly influenced" Christianity.

When the 'Kingdom of God' is established, marriage (which was understood to be a part of the old, passing order) will not exist. According to the Bible as it exists today, the risen ones will "neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven" (Mark 12:25). Similarly, St. Paul's understanding of marriage in the light of the coming kingdom of God was as follows: "... the time is short. From now on those who have wives

should live as if they had none... For the world in its present form is passing away" (1 Corinthians 7:29-30). The early Christians believed that the end of time was relatively near, so marriage was not deemed worthwhile: "I would like you to be free from concern" (1 Corinthians 7:32). So it was felt that the unmarried, widowers and widows would fare better if they did not marry. Celibacy was demanded, not only of ascetics and monks, but of increasing numbers of the clergy, as a matter of duty.

The Bible, a book written by men and containing only fragments of the original revealed Books given to Prophets over the centuries (including the Torah, Psalms and Gospel), contain many references to the position of women in society. For example:

"As in all the congregations of the saints, women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says." (1 Corinthians, 14:33-34)

The inferiority of the female is indoctrinated from birth:

"... A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days... If she gives birth to a daughter, for two weeks the woman will be unclean..." (Leviticus, 12:1, 5)

"Wives, submit to your husbands... For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church..." (Ephesians, 5:22-23)

"Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this you have done?' The woman said, 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate.'... To the woman he said, 'I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain will you give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you.'"
(Genesis, 3:13, 16)

St. Paul said: "The head of the woman is the man ... for a man ... is the image and glory of God. I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence."¹³ Based on the Biblical image of Eve as a seductive temptress, Christian theologians have historically associated women with sexual desire and viewed her with deep suspicion, loathing and fear. Throughout the history of Christianity and the Roman Church, theologians, moralists and ethicists depicted women as corrupt, weak, lustful and evil; the 'daughters of Eve', who are to be shunned and avoided at all costs.¹⁴ The post-Christian feminist Mary Daly insists that since the Genesis stories were written by men, and their conception of God is irrevocably androcentric, they cannot be applied to or by women.¹⁵

Interestingly, in his 1988 *Encyclical*, Pope John Paul II stated his belief that mothers are more important than fathers when it comes to raising children. There is no connection between man's procreative role in conception and their social role as fathers, and it is only mothers who are socially defined by their procreative role.¹⁶

British History

Today, in the twenty first century, women are equal to men before the law. Yet, in culture, practice and reality, they are still classified as belonging to an underclass, because of the heavy burden of responsibility and the insignificance of their work in the eyes of men. Women in Britain have historically been denied their earnings and inheritance and it was only in 1856 that this was changed. In 1857, divorced women were finally granted the same rights as single women; married women had to wait until 1893. A court case in 1840 highlighted how insignificantly women were held in British society:¹⁷

"The question raised in this case is, singularly whether by common law the husband, in order to prevent his wife from eloping, has a right to confine her in his own dwellings and restrain her from liberty, for an indefinite time... There can be no doubt the husband has by law power and dominion over his wife, and may keep her by force... and beat her, but not in a violent or cruel manner."¹⁸

Throughout the nineteenth century, women became more aware of their lack of basic rights in society, and towards the end of this century, a significant movement for change developed, and the suffragettes campaigned for women's right to vote. The political franchise had for centuries been restricted to property-owners only, and had only recently (in the mid-nineteenth century) been extended to all males over the age of 21. Women had to wait until 1928 for this right to be granted to them. Equal pay for equal

work took longer; it had to wait until 1975. It is clear, then, that Western Europe in general, and Britain in particular, were very late in granting basic rights and equal status to women, contrary to the image portrayed by the critics of Islam who attempt to take a moral higher ground.

This is the global context into which the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ brought the message of Islam, and set about advocating divinely ordained principles that would liberate women from the oppression of androcentric societies and offer them the shade, protection and equality of Islam. At a time when the entire world treated women with contempt, when women were unable even to question their status, let alone demand basic human and civil rights, Islam liberated them and elevated their status. To discuss how Islam enhanced the role and position of women in seventh-century Arabia without addressing present day issues would be a great disservice to the readers. Islam is the religion of all people for all times and is equally applicable globally. There is a need to understand how the old forms of the oppression of women have been replaced in recent times by new and more subtle forms of oppression which are equally devastating. Although the apparent differences between the genders within statutes and on the social level in Europe appear to have been reduced, women still find themselves at the bottom of indices relating to health, wealth, corporate positions, and even happiness.

How many feminists, fighting against the oppression and subjugation of women, would disagree that women should

be viewed as the equals of men? Or that female infanticide is evil? Translated into theological terms, how many of these feminists would disagree that women should be viewed as equal with men in the sight of God and be rewarded equally for their virtues? Or that, as wives, they are entitled to mutual consultation in the affairs of their families? That they should be allowed to possess assets and have a right to their own businesses and incomes? That they should be entitled to inherit from their parents, husbands and other relatives? That they should be allowed to live freely without the fear of being molested or raped? That they should be free from the danger of sexual harassment and should not be portrayed as sex-objects or as objects for male desires? That they should be protected from the degradation of pornography? That their suffering in childbirth should be recognised, appreciated and rewarded? For all of these basic rights and more, women of all colours, creeds and social statuses have had to fight very hard. It is only Islam that has promoted women's rights from the beginning of its advent. Islam granted them liberation from the evils of inequality hundreds of years ago, before the word 'liberation' became fashionable. It is however regrettable and unfortunate that, despite the equitable status afforded by Islam to women, many Muslim communities still uphold their cultural repressive customs.

Notes

1. <http://www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/women.html>
2. <http://www.humanities.mq.edu.au/Ockham/y6704.html>
3. Suleiman, Rubin, *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, Harvard University Press, 1986, p.57.

4. Unterman, Alan, *The Jews: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1981, p. 133.
5. In the *Mishnah*, there is a debate against restraint in educating women. See: op. cit., p. 140.
6. Moore, George Foot, *Judaism*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927, Vol. 2, p. 131.
7. Trepp, Leo, *Judaism: Development and Life*, California: Dickenson Publishing Co, 1966, p. 191.
8. Unterman, Alan, op. cit., p. 140.
9. Leslie, Julie, *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, Motilal Banarsidass, 1992, p. 183.
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11. Delderfield, Erid, *Kings and Queens of England and Britain*, David & Charles, 1990.
12. Maulana Mufti Muhammad Shafi, *Ma'ariful Qur'an*, Maktaba e Darul Uloom Karachi Pakistan, 1996.
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15. Ibid., p. 340.
16. Ibid., p. 346.
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II

THE SOCIAL POSITION OF WOMEN IN THE WEST

Now that women are conceived to be in charge of their own affairs, does this mean that they have reached the pinnacle of gender equality? Has the 'new woman' of today overcome the oppression and subjugation of the 'bad old days'? Does the liberation of women signal the advent of a new, morally and ethically correct world? Has this liberation achieved real emancipation and freed women from injustice? Have we seen the last of oppression, infanticide, prostitution, rape, divorce and single-parent (usually single-mother) families?

The old customs practised by the so-called 'uncivilised' peoples of ancient Rome, Persia, Arabia and Judea are alive and well but under a new guise. In this modern advanced age, instead of innocent babies being killed at birth, they are aborted in the womb.¹ When abortion is carried out as a contraceptive measure it becomes difficult for it not to be described as murder. Doctors and other

abortionists are pushing the boundaries further yet, in termination of the unwanted babies, some even close to the pregnancy term. The latest of such methods which goes by the grotesque name of 'partial-birth abortion', involves the partial removal of the foetus from the womb; the head is left inside the mother, and the abortionist pierces the back of the skull with a sharp instrument, inserts a catheter and removes the brains. Then the remains of the murdered child are fully removed. This horrific procedure was devised as a way to get around US laws which state that any child born alive has human rights, and its death would be viewed as murder by the courts. It is a sick and twisted mind that dreamt up something like this. Why should a living child in the womb be deserving of fewer rights than one which is already born?

The practice of former centuries expecting women to fend for, protect and raise children is now transferred to a new phenomenon known as 'single-parent families'. In by-gone times, men who considered themselves above the law and superior to women murdered women they had no more use for (consider the blood-lust of Henry VIII, founder of the Church of England, and how he disposed of some of his wives). Nowadays, although women are rarely victims of murder by their spouses, they are in increasing numbers being driven towards drugs and alcohol, and tragically a few of them ultimately kill themselves.

Reason and modern technology has replaced the old Spartan way of having women 'inseminated' by strong

men. This is now refined, by genetic engineering and artificial insemination using sperm banks. While such procedures have provided positive break-throughs in detecting genetically inherited diseases, they have also been abused to select the gender of babies and mundane characteristics like the colour of the eyes and hair. In a perverse way we have achieved the same as that which the Spartans aspired to achieve under the auspices of science and technology, the 'gods' of modern age.

According to popular belief, the twentieth century has seen the greatest advancement in equality for women. In particular, the period after the Second World War, from the late 1940s until the present day, is hailed as a golden era. But during this period, social, financial and health pressures have weighed heavily against women. A survey into the world of government statistics reflects a true picture of the plight of women in today's world.

For how long can the world continue to camouflage women's misery using technical terms and a presumed matter-of-fact attitude? The only way to achieving a just, fair and secure future for all requires firstly, acknowledgement of the disadvantaged position of women and secondly, an attempt to resolve this disadvantage.

Abortion

In Britain, registered abortions have increased almost ten-fold since abortion was 'legalised' in 1968. In that year, there were nearly 22,000 registered abortions, compared with

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Abortion

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over 200,000 in 2008. Since records began, there has been a steady increase in the number of abortions performed each year. In 1996 only one per cent of abortions were performed for medical reasons. The results of population surveys indicate that a third of all conceptions that occurred outside of marriage were terminated by abortion in 1993.² Abortions among girls aged below 16 have risen by 27% in the past decade to 4,376 in 2007.

The figures for the USA are even more devastating. Although registered abortion has been in decline over the past decade, it stood at over one million 'recorded legal abortions' in 2008. The Alan Guttmacher Institute, a research organisation affiliated with Planned Parenthood (America's leading abortion provider) estimate the total number of abortions is 10 to 20% higher than the official government statistics.³ 40% of all pregnancies in 2008 ended in abortion. It is estimated at this rate that one-third of all American women will have had an abortion by the age of 45.

In Canada where the womb is considered a safe place for the unborn, the abortion rate is nearly half that of USA. However, for 2008, this was still equivalent to over 20% of all pregnancies being terminated by abortion.⁴

In Japan, one of the most advanced industrial countries of the world, where time is money and money is the substance of life, the rate of abortion is twice that of the USA. This nation suffers over 13 abortions per 1,000 births.⁵

The most stupendous blood bath of the innocent unborn life has been carried out in the Former Soviet Union. The Soviet Union suffered an incredible 12.8 million abortions in 1965 out of a total population of 233 million. At present, over 50% of all Russian women's pregnancies end in abortions.⁶

The trivial nature of abortion, human life and women's sentiments held in the Western world was brought to the fore when a charity organisation 'Marie Stopes International' opened six day-centres across England. They provided a 'walk-in, walk-out' abortion 'that could easily be completed during a working woman's lunch-time break'. Their leading abortionist Dr Tim Black horrified the nation when he disdainfully described the method of abortion by suction as the 'minimal service interception', a 'seamless service without medical drama or moral censure', and a 'quantum leap in service delivery'. Abortion, a traumatic, sorrowful and grievous moment for every unfortunate woman has been reduced to the vocabulary of mere shopping.⁷

It is worth pondering over these figures; the discussion here is not about abortion for medical reasons but for social and personal motives. We should never forget that each of them is much more than statistics. Each number represents the murder of an innocent, helpless baby by supposedly 'civilized' human beings.

The freedom of choice within the global broader civilisation we have created has allowed the killing of unborn children,

claiming over *one billion* lives throughout the world over the past 25 years.⁸

In the 'barbaric' past, infant girls were killed for economic or social fears or out of shame for having given birth to a girl. After centuries on the path of civilisation there appears to be little change on this front. These figures account only for those abortions which were registered. As for illegal abortions and those carried out in private clinics, only God knows their exact number.

Rape

It is not easy to find accurate figures on rape. Many incidents are not reported, and the police statistics do not include cases where the allegations have been withdrawn. It is safe to assume, therefore, that the official figures are an underestimate.

The 2000 British Crime Survey (BCS) asked women if they had experienced an incident of sexual victimisation since age 16 and also 'in the last 12 months' (preceding the date of the interview):

- 0.9% of women aged 16 to 59 said they had been subjected to some form of sexual victimisation (including rape) during the last year.
- 0.4% of women said they had been raped in this period.
- In the year preceding 2000, it is estimated that 61,000 women were the victim of rape in England and Wales.

In 1984 the British police estimated that there were over 20,000 cases of indecent assault and nearly 1,500 rape cases in Britain. In 2008, the number of women raped in the UK rose to over 47,000.⁹ Since 1984, the number of recorded sexual offences has risen at a slightly higher rate than recorded crime in general. By 1994, the number of recorded sexual offences had risen to 32,000.¹⁰ If we accept the higher figures, we may say that one rape on average occurs every one hour in England. In other words, by the time you finish reading this chapter, someone, somewhere in the country, will have become yet another rape statistic. To add insult to injury there were only 15 specialist 'Sexual Assault Referral Centres' in the UK and the conviction rate in 2004 for rape was just 5.3%.

The USA, a country claiming the greatest freedoms and rights, has the world's highest rate of rape. It is four times higher than Germany, 18 times higher than England and almost 20 times higher than Japan. In one state of Utah alone the rape rate is 44.6 per 100,000. In 1995, 2,071 Utah children under the age of 18 were sexually abused: 633 of these children were under the age of 6.¹¹ In the USA, 1.3 women are raped every minute, which means 78 rapes every hour, 1,872 rapes each day, 683,280 rapes each year.

Looking at such figures, a question springs to mind: who is committing these barbaric acts against women? Are these the acts of mentally disturbed characters roaming the streets? The popular stereotype could not be farther from the truth. In 1980, only 2% of men convicted of rape were

referred for psychiatric treatment. Over 75% of women who were raped had some prior contact with the man who raped them.¹² These women were raped by acquaintances, people they knew and probably trusted. Sixteen per cent were raped by a close friend or relative.¹³

The table below derived from the 1998 and 2000 British Crime Surveys indicates the levels of victimisation of women by acquaintances.

	Rape %	Sexual assault %	Sexual victimisation %
Current partners			
boy/girlfriends	45	18	32
Ex-partners			
boy/girlfriends	11	8	10
Other intimates	10	11	11
Dates	11	12	10
Acquaintances	16	28	22
Strangers	8	23	15

*Relationship to perpetrator, last incident of sexual victimisation experienced since age 16*¹²

A study carried out by the National Council for Civil Liberties showed that 38% of men use their power and position at work to rape women. A *Redbook* survey found that 88% of respondents had experienced sexual harassment at work. In the UK, 86% of managers and 66% of employers had experienced such problems. The British Civil Service found that 70% of those surveyed had experienced sexual harassment.¹⁴

In Britain, even in that bastion of law and order, the police service, the problem of sexual harassment is serious. Female officers with twenty-five years' service in the force may be subjected to harassment. Examples of offensive incidents include being spied on while in police station showers, being 'casually' shown pornographic pictures, and being physically groped. One female officer said, "You go into a room and three or four men will run their hands over you to see if you are wearing the 'full tackle,' i.e., suspenders. It happens frequently."¹⁵

Rape and other forms of sexual assault have wide-reaching effects on victims on many levels. This includes their ability to meet their basic needs, functional impairment, and poor physical and mental health. These forms of traumatic victimisation are associated with a higher prevalence of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) than other types of traumatic events. For example the National Women's Study, an epidemiological survey of 4008 women, found the lifetime prevalence of PTSD resulting from rape and sexual assault to be 32% and 30.8% respectively, compared with a prevalence of 9.4% caused by non-crime-related trauma (e.g. motor vehicle accident).

Population based studies indicate that about one in nine women have met the criteria for PTSD at some point during their lifetime. In real population numbers, this is equivalent to about 11 million women in the USA. Other common mental health consequences of rape are serious depression and alcohol or drug abuse.¹⁶

These statistics reveal an increase in the number of women who are attacked around the world, and a failure of societies to protect them. The low rate of conviction reveals a serious flaw in the legal system which is supposed to protect the vulnerable. The issue of rape is far greater than many other forms of violent crime, as in most cases the victim is a woman, and the physical act of rape is intended to strip a woman of her power and influence and make her feel powerless against her attacker. This show of 'power' by a sick and lurid perpetrator will inevitably have a long lasting impact on the victim, stripping her of her confidence and security.

Marriage and Divorce

The latter part of the twentieth century has seen an increase in cohabitation, i.e. couples 'living together' before marriage. Nearly half of women born in the 1960s said that they had cohabited at some point. This social trend is supposed to iron out any differences between partners and ensure that they are compatible before they tie the knot and commit themselves to marriage. This 'trial run' is meant to increase the chances of successful marriage, but the truth is that the increase in cohabitation has been accompanied by an increase in divorce rate. Britain now has the highest divorce rate in the European Union. In 1983 there were over 147,000 divorces granted by the courts. By 1994, this number had increased to 165,000.¹⁷ Between 2006 and 2007, the provisional number of divorces granted in the UK was 144,220. Even though this figure is 20% lower than the highest number of divorces registered in 1993 (180,018),¹⁸

the reason for the reduction lies in the fact that there is a year on year decline in the number of marriages taking place. In 2006, there were 275,140 registered marriages in the UK, compared to 480,285 in 1972.¹⁹

The USA mirrors the UK; the divorce rate there reached 5.3 divorces per 1,000 people in 1981 and is (in 2008) down to 3.6 per 1,000 people. That is the lowest rate since 1970. However, the overall picture in 2002 was that only 59% of the population was married compared with 62% in 1970. Further, 10% of the population is divorced and 24% never married.²⁰

Tables of divorce statistics do not convey the suffering of partners whose marriages break down, or of their children whose world is torn apart by the parents' separation.

The silent sufferers in divorced families are no doubt the children, but even the partners are not immune from the trauma of divorce. Divorce now ranks as the number one factor linked with suicide rates in the USA, outstripping other important social and economic predictors. Divorced people are three times more likely to commit suicide than people who are married.²¹

Single Parent Families

There is yet another set of depressing statistics that has been on the increase while very little attention is paid to addressing the underlying cause. In 2007, nearly a quarter of children in England lived with one parent, and this

number has trebled since 1972. Of all the babies born in 1992, 31% were born to unwed mothers. Nearly 2,500 girls under the age of 15 gave birth, and over 23,000 new mothers in that year were aged under 20.²²

Factfile [2007]²³

- * Nearly a quarter (24%) of children lived with just one parent in 2006, three times the proportion recorded in 1972;
- * Lone-parent families are three times more likely to live in rented accommodation than couples with children;
- * In 2005, 66% of single-parent families lived in rented housing compared with 22% of couples with dependent children;
- * More than half (52%) of them rented in the social sector compared with 14% of two-parent families;
- * Lone-parent families are also more likely to live in 'non-decent' homes, according to the ONS;
- * In 2004, 29% of lone-parent households with children lived in buildings which did not meet certain minimum standards, compared with 23% of 'couple households';
- * Since 1971 the proportion of all people living in 'traditional' family households of couples with dependent children had fallen from 52% to 37%;
- * 9 out of 10 lone-parent families are headed by mothers;
- * Children from single-parent families are twice as likely to suffer from mental health problems as those living with married parents.²⁴

The reality behind these statistics is that women are bearing most, if not all, of the responsibility for raising their children. This form of oppression of women should not be ignored. It is incumbent upon society to highlight this form of oppression, which in essence has allowed men to walk away from their responsibilities.

What is more alarming is that a growing number of single mothers are trying to cope with very little money. A survey from Scotland in 1999 showed that 70% of single parent households in Scotland had a net annual income of less than £10,000, compared to 25% of small parent families²⁵ and this typifies the position of lone parent families. The impact of poverty on educational achievements, crime rates, health, moral values and self-esteem has been well-documented and has led to reports in Britain and elsewhere which warn of an 'emerging underclass' whose future is indescribably bleak.

The burden of family care on women in western countries has been growing and in the USA, according to *Families and Living Arrangements: 2006*, there were 12.9 million one-parent families in 2006 – 10.4 million single-mother families and 2.5 million single-father families.

Just over two-thirds (67 percent) of the nation's 73.7 million children younger than 18 lived with two married parents in 2006.²⁶ In the UK, the Office for National Statistics of 2007 stated that children in the UK were three times more

likely to live in one-parent households than they were in 1972.²⁷

The 'normal house' with a father, mother and children is fast becoming an illusion in the western world with detrimental repercussions on the individuals involved and the greater society. The social impact of single parenting on children is devastating. 75% of children in chemical dependency hospitals are from single parent families.²⁸ 20% of children in single parent families have a learning, emotional or behavioural problem.²⁹ Single parenting' is one of the most brutal forms of oppression which in most cases falls upon the laps of women.

Health

When it comes to health matters, women fare less well than men, especially in respect to mental health. Single mothers, in particular, suffer poorer health than women in two-parent households. General Health Survey data indicate that lone mothers are more likely to have both long-standing and recent illnesses, and are less likely to assess their health over the previous twelve months as being good. In this survey, only 43% of single mothers described their health as 'good' and nearly 39% reported a long-standing illness.³⁰

Women also suffer poorer psychological health than men. They see their GPs (family doctors) more often for mental health problems, and are more frequently prescribed drugs for anxiety and depression.³¹ Women are more unwell and

unhappy than men because of the work they do and the conditions in which they do it.³²

If you were to question a randomly-selected sample of the population and ask them, "Who suffers more from mental-health related disorders?", the majority will reply: women. However, this has not always been the case. Studies from 1850 until the Second World War show that men used to be more prone to mental disorders than women. In the majority of studies prior to 1950 or the Second World War, the overall rates were higher for men.³³

In the case of women's mental health, the findings differ sharply from the 1950s onwards, with the advent of so-called equal status of the sexes. A report by B P Dohrenwend in the *American Journal of Sociology* shows that prior to 1950, for every seven men diagnosed as mentally ill, only two women were diagnosed with the same; after 1950, the ratio changed to 22 women for every two men. This catastrophic reversal in mental illness statistics accompanied the rise of 'women's liberation' in the West.

Mental illness has a correlation with self-worth and it can thus be deduced that post-World War II women have been subjected to unfair self-analysis which has resulted in a devaluation of their status in society. The reason for this greater sense of frustration may be found in the unfair burden which is placed on the 'liberated' woman. Women are now expected to display masculine traits in the workplace, but are also supposed to maintain their

'femininity' – a dual burden that is too heavy for many women to bear and which may eventually lead to emotional and physical breakdown.

Mental illness researchers have also discovered that single people are more prone to mental illness than those who are married, and their prognosis is not as good. As early as the turn of the twentieth century, the sociologist Emile Durkheim noted that the severing of marital ties is particularly dangerous for mental health, as indicated by a high suicide rate among the widowed and divorced. Since that time, all studies³⁴ comparing the mental health of those who are widowed or divorced with the mental health of those who are married have also found that the rates of mental illness are higher among the former. With the rise of divorce rates, and the greater financial, social and physical impact it has on women, women's mental health should be of great concern.

Alcohol and Smoking

The western idea of the equality of the sexes has been accompanied by an increase in the vices that were previously thought to be a male preserve, namely the consumption of alcohol and tobacco. In 1992, 14-year old girls in England drank an average of 3.8 units of alcohol a week; by 2004 this had risen to 9.7 units. The Office of National Statistics reported the recent upward trend in heavy drinking among young women may have peaked. The proportion of 16 to 24 year old women who had drunk more than six units on at least one day in the previous week increased from 24%

to 28% between 1998 and 2002 but has since fallen to 22% in 2005.³⁵

Smoking used to be a man's vice, as it was deemed improper for women to smoke. However, the number of women who smoke is now more or less the same as the number of men. In 2006, 23% men and 21% women were cigarette smokers. The trend in young people is more worrying with girls more likely to smoke than boys. In 2004, 7% of boys aged 11 to 15 in England were regular smokers compared with 10% of girls.³⁶

Although anti-smoking campaigns have led to many adults quitting the habit, tobacco companies have responded by targeting younger people, on the premise that if they can get teenagers, and in some cases children 'hooked', they will continue to have a ready market for their product. Reports indicate that more young women than young men are starting to smoke, which indicates that, in the near future, the majority of smokers will be women. Like alcohol, the impact of smoking is more detrimental on women's health. The Royal College of Physicians Research Unit reported that a study of 1,600 cancer patients in 46 hospitals in the UK showed that women are twice as likely to develop the most fatal type of lung cancer than male smokers.³⁷

Pornography

The rapid growth of the pornography industry since the 1950s has, again, mirrored the progress of 'equality' in the West. Pornography does not depict women as human beings

with feelings and needs, but as mere available commodities to be used and then cast aside. Women are led to believe that by selling their bodies, they are achieving equality, but in fact they become subordinate to men who use the idea of equality to exploit women for their own selfish desires and financial gain.

In the 1980s, a further step in the manipulation of women appeared. Sheila Jeffreys, a feminist, wrote: "When the campaign against pornography first got underway, it was possible to attack pornography as a male product designed for male consumption. This is not true in the 1980s. Women are being told - by libertarian theorists - that because 'women are equal now,' it is all right for women to enjoy pornography. This ideology serves more to defeat women's emancipation than to pander to it. The idea of selling pornography to women from the 1980s has become a more sophisticated and effective way of bolstering male power."³⁸

Pornography is the biggest media category world-wide. It enters our homes via television and magazines, as well as video, film and satellite media. Globally, pornography generates \$7 billion annually, more than the legitimate film and music industries combined. In the US, pornographic films gross \$1 million daily, and outnumber films of other genres by 30%. In Britain, 20 million copies of pornographic magazines are sold each year, producing an annual revenue of over £500 million. In Sweden, a large 'sex shop' may offer over 500 titles of

pornographic magazines, and a corner shop can offer up to 50 titles. It is estimated that 18 million American men buy a pornographic magazine each month.³⁹ Pornography throughout the world is becoming ever more violent and gruesome, and is spreading further via new technology: pornography on the Internet, including 'hard-core' and child pornography is a growing problem worldwide. The Western world is also exporting this deviant trend, which exploits women in the most abhorrent fashion, to the so-called third world.

This is a glimpse into the state of affairs of Western "civilisation"; unfortunately the statistics which reflect the hardships suffered by women are hardly discussed in a holistic manner. Although the western world is very good at compiling and preserving data, it fails miserably to examine the causes and origins for such horrific statistics regarding women.

How can crimes against women be reduced, if not eliminated altogether? The path of supposed equality has benefited women in the economic field. However, the western concept of equality between the sexes continues to demand a heavy price on women's social, moral, physical and ethical wellbeing. The statistics bear evidence that the world is sliding towards a barbarity akin to that of the pre-Islamic era (*jāhiliyyah*). The lot of women today differs from those prevailing before Islam only in terms of the modern technologically advanced and comfortable surrounding that they take place in.

What are the possible solutions to these problems? Human reason and logical-based legislations are the order of the day in modern times, but if the past century is to bear witness, then relief is not on the horizon. Resorting to human intellect has allowed many of the ills of society to be massaged away by labelling them with technical or politically correct terms. Many of the problems, especially if they are suffered by women, are almost accepted as the consequences of 'demands of the time' and those who collapse under the strain are labelled failures. It is thus not unfamiliar to hear a British politician calling 'single mothers' spongers of the state, or even worst, lazy. Those who are driven to drugs, alcohol and suicide are sometimes seen to have an inherent weakness and having failed the system rather than the system having failed them.

There are numerous issues at play which have provided us with such grim statistics on issues affecting women. The capitalist system has played a significant role in stripping away women's maternal instincts and popularised the drive for a career often at the cost of family. A further impact on both women and families is the focus on the nuclear family to the exclusion of the extended family which increases the burden on working mothers who bear most of the family responsibility. On another level, fashion trends and ever changing beauty standards, engineered by the capitalist drive, have wrought havoc on women's health, wealth and confidence, in addition to the pressing demand to wipe away modesty in behaviour or dress. Under these circumstances women who are modestly

dressed or show signs of modesty are quickly labelled as 'oppressed' or 'repressed.'

On the issue of male-female interaction, scientific research conducted by psychologists⁴⁰ were found to support the Islamic teachings that when a man and a woman are alone in enclosed surroundings, the likelihood of sexual engagement with one another increases. The lack of formality between men and women in free mixing cultures takes away the security and protection that women would otherwise benefit from, as they have historically in many cultures. The result of this new cultural norm has led to societal breakdown with increasing numbers of divorce, single parent families, suicide, rape and many other heart-breaking social ills. Fourteen hundred years ago, the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ warned about the dangers of free mixing between men and women outside of specific remits such as the family. He informed us that: "When a man and a woman are alone together, the third one present with them will be the devil"⁴¹, working to sow mischief between the two.

The result of modern norms is that women are being victimised just for being women. As already stated, 75% of all rapes are committed by men who know their victims personally. In the workplace, 38% of men in positions of power abuse their positions to take advantage of women working with them. The most frequent cause of divorce is adultery, which is fermented by the free mixing of men and women. The impact of this on the younger generations

has been catastrophic with children as young as 12 getting pregnant and being raped. The reasons for this are multifaceted: the over sensualised portrayal of sex in the media, peer pressure, fashion, and arguably co-education.

In the modern world, the benefits of equality for women in the legal and economic fields have been undermined by the demands being made of them personally. In the name of equality, women have had to abandon their inherent strengths and throw to the wind caution with regard to their weaknesses. The impact on societies is reflected in the burden women have to shoulder for this unnatural tendency, by suffering huge losses as far as their human values are concerned. Equality for women should never have meant that they be pushed on the same plane as men, but rather on a parallel and equal plane. In a consumer led society where money, beauty and masculinity are the real things that count, a woman has to work and behave like a man while, at the same time, dress in a feminine and appealing way in order to stand on equal terms with men. In this way she is being made to compromise moral values and her feminine nature.

Islam has promoted and regulated the unique and complementary roles of men and women, and this will be closely examined later. However, the disinformation campaign directed at most Westerners claims that Islam preaches inhuman practices, and the oppression of women is specifically emphasised. Those promoting these ideas usually stress the fact that Muslim women are required to dress modestly,

and are prohibited from mixing freely with the opposite sex. Yet this is also true for Muslim men but somehow Muslim men who refrain from freely mixing with the opposite sex are not seen as oppressed on the same grounds but rather considered fundamentalists. Polygyny is also allowed in Islam and this is used as 'proof' that Islam preaches the suppression of women. Whilst such a relationship with more than one partner is abhorrent to the critics of Muslims, they remain silent on the far greater number of individuals involved in 'affairs' outside of marriage.

Distorted views of Islam have been propagated by the ignorant and the malicious for centuries. In Britain alone, between 1960 and 1978 over 22,000 books and 43,000 journals published material slandering the teachings of Islam. These figures have reached astronomical levels after the tragic events of 9/11, with attacks on the religious values of Islam being heard on a daily, if not hourly, basis from some quarters, whether it is academia, the media, think tanks or politicians. When television, schools, books, newspapers and magazines are all conveying this distorted message that Islam oppresses women, it is no wonder that people in the West are convinced by the popular views on Islam without any recourse to actual facts.

There is an urgent need to educate society at large, including Muslims, about the Islamic teachings regarding women who have a greater tendency to uphold traditional values over religious ones. The Qur'ān and the Prophetic practice are quite explicit on this matter and the next chapter

explains the status of women in Islam according to these two sources.

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III

WOMEN IN ISLAM

Spiritual Equality of Men and Women

One of the salient revolutionary features introduced to human history by Islam was the emancipation of women from any notion of inferiority or of being created from a lower base material than man. Islam ushered in equality for women at a time when inequality was rife, and the new teachings broke all known cultural and faith restrictions placed on women globally. These rights were granted to women without the need for them to launch any campaigns to achieve them.

In the Qur'ān, Allah ﷻ makes no distinction between men and women who submit themselves to Him:

For Muslim men and women - for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast (and deny themselves), for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and

women who engage much in Allah's praise - for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward. [al-Aḥzāb 33:35]

A number of Islamic virtues are mentioned in this Qur'ānic verse, but the primary message here is that these virtues are applicable to both women and men. Both genders have human rights and duties to an equal degree, and the rewards of the Hereafter are available to both women and men.¹ Each individual will be judged according to his or her deeds. Gender is simply not an issue in this matter.

*And their Lord has accepted of them, and answered them:
'Never shall I suffer to be lost the work of any of you,
be he male or female: you are members, one of another..
[Āl 'Imrān 3:195]*

Allah ﷻ grants the prayers of the believers, and has told us that He will not let the labour of any individual go to waste. Everyone will reap the reward of his or her efforts. Man and woman alike are members of the human race, created from the same source and joined by Islam as partners in life as well as in reward.²

*Whoever works righteousness, man or woman, and has Faith,
verily, to him will We give a new Life, and life that is good and
pure, and We will bestow on such their reward according to the
best of their action. [al-Naḥl 16: 97]*

The spiritual equality of women and men in Islam is abundantly clear from the outset. From the time a child

is conceived, Islam provides glad tidings to the pregnant woman regardless of the gender of the foetus. The pregnant woman is held in the highest esteem, and her patience in bearing the pains and discomforts of pregnancy is regarded as an act of astounding virtue which is heavily rewarded and brings her closer to Allah ﷻ. Men are in fact denied this great blessing. If the baby is a girl, this opens up further opportunities for both parents to attain Paradise. In stark contrast to the attitude of the pagan Arabian society which buried female babies alive, the Prophet ﷺ gave the glad tidings of paradise as a reward for the one who welcomes a daughter, brings her up properly, provides her with a sound education and arranges a good marriage for her.³

The Qur'ān categorically forbids the killing of babies, whether through infanticide or abortion, for fear of poverty or 'losing face' in the community:

*Say: 'Come, I will rehearse what Allah has (really) prohibited
you from: join not anything as equal with Him; be good to your
parents; kill not your children on a plea of want - We provide
sustenance for you and for them - come not nigh to shameful
deeds, whether open or secret; take not life, which Allah has
made sacred, except by way of justice and law: thus does He
command you, that you may learn wisdom. [al-An'ām 6:151]*

The Qur'ān forewarns those who consider the birth of girls a burden and go on to commit infanticide. In its own inimitable style, the Qur'ān informs us that the innocent girls who were slain for no other reason than being females

will be asked on the Day of Judgement for what sin they were slain:

When the female (infant) buried alive, is questioned – for what crime she was killed [al-Takwīr 81:8-9]

The crime is that of the parents, not of the child. The Islamic ethos reminds the parents, in this verse, that their deeds will not go unnoticed in the court of Allah ﷻ; they will have to answer for their actions. The children are not the property of the parents; they are rather an honour and a responsibility. Parents have to fulfil the basic needs of their children, irrespective of gender. It is almost beyond belief that in the modern world the practice of infanticide, in the form of abortion, is allowed. Since China introduced the one-child policy or (planned birth policy) in 1979, it has experienced an abortion epidemic. Under its strict population control laws, families are allowed only one child, and most parents want sons, so girls are abandoned and allowed to die, or even killed, so that the parents may have another child, hopefully a boy. This is leading to an imbalance in the ratio of boys to girls in China and Chinese officials reported that 118 boys were born for every 100 girls in 2005, and some reports have projected an excess of 30 million males, compared with the number of women, in less than 15 years.⁴

In other advancing countries, particularly India, science is the new god in gender selection. Misuse of ultra-sound technology has led couples to abort babies when the foetus

is revealed to be a female. Advancement in genetics is also used to have male babies. In India, gender selection is responsible for a widening gender gap, with the number of girls per 1,000 boys dropping to 927 from 962 since 1985.⁵

By contrast, not only does the Qur'ān protect the female infant from being murdered by ignorant parents by way of admonishment, it also describes her birth as good news, and grants her the right of inheritance from her father, husband and brother, and gives her the right to own property and conduct business transactions independently and in her own right. While these may not seem like revolutionary rights today in Europe, they changed the lives of women under Islamic rule dramatically at a time when Europe was still debating whether women have a soul.

When news is brought to one of them, of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens and he is filled with inward grief! With shame does he hide himself from his people, because of the news that he has had! Shall he retain it on (sufferance and) contempt, or bury it in the dust? Ah! What an evil (choice) they decide on. [al-Nahl 16:58-59]

This verse refers to the period of pre-Islamic ignorance, before the advent of Islam, when it was not uncommon for pagan Arabs to bury female infants alive. Girls were considered a social, financial and security burden. In their belief, girls brought shame to the family. Since girls needed to be cared for and married off when old enough, it was believed that there was no benefit to be reaped from

them. Moreover, since girls did not fight in wars and were taken prisoners, some took the drastic action of killing them at birth to avoid such a thing from happening. Islam prohibited this barbarity. The central belief within Islam which assigns one's sustenance (wealth, health or any other progress) to Allah ﷻ alone helped purify Arabian society from greed and selfish indulgences. Islam put women on an equal footing with men and freed society from a capitalist attitude where girls and children were measured in terms of material value. Islam totally forbade the killing of children centuries ago when this despicable and inhumane practice was prevalent, yet today this very same practice is being disguised using advanced scientific techniques which are being employed to 'kill off' female foetuses. In some communities, unfortunately more so in the third and developing world, the birth of a girl is still resented. A girl may be neglected whilst the best resources and education are afforded to her brothers.

The spiritual equality of the genders in Islam is not only confined to the metaphysical but extends to all spheres of life. Education is made obligatory for both male and female. The Prophet ﷺ said: "Seeking knowledge is a duty for every Muslim, male and female". He also urged Muslims to "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave."

The importance of seeking knowledge cannot be overstressed. All Muslims are urged to educate themselves, to act upon their knowledge, and to convey it to others.

... Those truly fear Allah, among His Servants, who have knowledge. [Fāṭir 35:28]

Only those who have knowledge and understanding will be truly conscious of the glory and majesty of Allah ﷻ. Only they will understand the transience of the phenomenal world and permanence of the world to come, and this will lead them to focus on their future life and strive to attain the knowledge of Divine guidance.

There are records of the names of numerous female scholars of religion; foremost among them is 'Ā'ishah ؓ⁶, the beloved wife of the Prophet ﷺ, who was one of the greatest narrators of *aḥādīth*. Not only was she responsible for conveying over two thousand *aḥādīth*, but the great scholars of her time used to consult her on matters of jurisprudence (*fiqh*).

Muslim women played a pivotal role in education and in every era there were prominent Muslim women in the field of education. Ibn Baṭṭūṭah records that, while on his travels, he studied *ḥadīth* under Zaynab bint Aḥmad (d.740/1339) who used to deliver public lectures on the *Musnad* of Aḥmad and the *Shamā'il* of al-Tirmidhī.⁷

Ibn 'Asākir the famous historian who was tutored by more than 1200 men also had 80 women as his tutors. He obtained the special *ijāzah* of Zaynab bint 'Abd al-Raḥmān for the *Muwatta'* of Imām Mālik.⁸

Marriage

There is no celibacy in Islam. Islam considers sexuality to be a natural part of life, which is to be channelled into a healthy marriage. The sinful fulfilment of the sexual urge and exploitation of women through prostitution, pornography or rape are utterly forbidden.

The Prophet ﷺ advised Muslims: "Whoever is able to marry, should marry, for that will help him lower his gaze and guard his modesty."⁹ Apart from providing a legitimate channel for sexual energy, marriage provides comfort, security and companionship. Not only does Islam regard marriage as necessary, but also declares it to be a positive virtue in that those who marry will be rewarded for doing so. The Prophet ﷺ emphasised the importance of marriage when he described it as being half of faith.¹⁰

Marriage should take place only after the consent of both partners; neither male nor female should be forced into marriage. Islam clearly states that a marriage contracted without the free consent of the woman is null and void. The Prophet ﷺ said: "No widow should be married without consulting her, and no virgin should be married without her consent..."¹¹

Prospective marriage partners are encouraged to see one another before they agree to marry. Jābir رضي الله عنه¹² reported that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: "When one of you seeks to marry a woman, if he is able to have a look at the one he desires to marry, let him do so."¹³

Marriage in Islam is a contract between two equal parties. As an equal partner, the Muslim woman may stipulate conditions in the marriage contract which can even include an agreement to be paid for domestic duties. The closest that Western societies have come to such a marriage contract is the current fad for prenuptial agreements which allow for limited agreements between the parties. A greater right under marriage contracts was granted fourteen hundred years ago to Muslim women, whose stipulations may include the transfer of divorce power to herself, restricting the husband from polygamy, and clearly defining the conditions of maintenance.¹⁴

Marriage in Islam is much more than a means of satisfying sexual desires; it is a social contract of co-habitation through which both partners may find companionship and refuge from the trials and tribulations of life. In Islam, a woman is not seen as an object for male gratification or a workhorse who is expected to cater to his every need and whim. She is a spiritual and moral being who is brought into union with her husband on the basis of a solemn pledge which Allah ﷻ is called upon to witness. The Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said, "There is nothing like marriage for increasing love between two people."¹⁵

The Qur'ān describes marriage in the most moving and eloquent terms:

... They (wives) are your garments and you (husbands) are their garments... [al-Baqarah 2:187]

And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are Signs for those who reflect. [al-Rūm 30:21]

It is He Who created you from a single person, and made his mate of like nature, in order that he might dwell with her (in love)... [al-A'raf 7:189]

(He is) the Creator of the heavens and the earth: He has made for you pairs from among yourselves... [al-Shūrā 42:11]

Today in the West, married women who retain their maiden names are viewed as feminists or unusually self-assertive. Muslim women, however, have always been allowed, and even expected, to keep their maiden names after marriage. This right to maintain their own identity was given to women in Islam more than a thousand years ago.

Imām al-Ghazālī provides valuable advice to his students regarding the benefits of marriage. He lists five benefits: To have children; to control one's sexual passion; to find peace; to help one's remembrance of Allah ﷻ increase; to gain Allah's reward for serving one's family. He elaborates on each of these points as follow:

Children

The need to communicate one's values and help to preserve Islam are paramount. By having a righteous and God-fearing progeny one helps increase the number of

people who love the Prophet ﷺ. Children are also a source of prayers for the parents and if a child dies before the parents he/she becomes a means of intercession before Allah ﷻ on the day of judgement.

Sexual Passion

Marriage provides protection against illegitimate sexual relations and all its social, psychological, financial and health impacts. The Prophet ﷺ said, "If a man marries, half his religion is saved and he should fear Allah ﷻ for the remaining half."

Peace

The verses of the Holy Qur'ān elaborate upon this. Love between husband and wife provides a platform from which they can excel in matters of this world and of the next.

Time

Husbands and wives complement each other's work, and this helps provide extra time which can then be used in remembering their Lord. Time is a great blessing from Allah ﷻ.

Reward

Marriage itself is a means of gaining reward, as marriage involves a great deal of duties and obligations such as maintaining the family, having patience with one's partner, educating family members, earning a living in order to be able to support the family, and spending time in the

company of the family. For doing all these, one will be rewarded. It is for this reason that marriage in Islam is a means of getting closer to Allah ﷻ.

Another great impact on the status and position of women in Islam surround the Islamic narrative of the story of Adam and Eve. In Islam, Eve is not responsible for the 'fall' of humanity nor is she the first sinner and, hence, responsible for all of the woes of mankind. Men and women are the progeny of Adam, and so both have similar souls.

Mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord Who created you from a single Person, created, of like nature, his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women - fear Allah, through Whom you demand your mutual (rights)... [al-Nisā' 4:1]

And Allah has made for you mates (and companions) of your own nature, and made for you, out of them, sons and daughters and grandchildren. And provided for you sustenance of the best: will they then believe in vain things, and be ungrateful for Allah's favours? [al-Nahl 16:72]

Unlike the original Christian position, Islam does not view women as the instrument of the devil or as different creations than men. The Qur'ān describes women as *muḥṣanāt*, fortresses against evil, since women have the qualities of keeping their husbands on the righteous path.

Muslim men are continually admonished to treat their wives kindly. To those men who oppress their wives:

O you who believe! You are forbidden to inherit women against their will. Nor should you treat them with harshness, that you may take away part of the dower you have given them - except when they have been guilty of open lewdness; on the contrary live with them on a footing of kindness and equity. If you take a dislike to them it may be that you dislike a thing, and Allah brings about through it a great deal of good. [al-Nisā' 4:19]

Men are commanded by Allah ﷻ to consort with women amicably and honourably. They should refrain from harshness when speaking to or dealing with them. Any behaviour that goes against the convention of morality or common courtesy is prohibited. Iniquitous conduct is a sign of ignorance (*jāhiliyyah*) which Islam came to abolish.¹⁶

Muslim men are commanded to treat women equitably. The Qur'ān forbids them from seizing women's inheritance and from abusing them, sexually or otherwise - as was the custom prior to the advent of Islam and as is still practised in many societies where the rich and strong take advantage of the poor and weak. These rules of conduct apply not only to the Arabs of the seventh century, but to all subsequent generations. Men are forbidden from abusing women, and are commanded to live amicably with their marriage partners. If a man finds some trait or aspect of his wife's behaviour that he dislikes, it may be that Allah ﷻ

will bring about something good if he bears it graciously and accepts his wife for who she is. Similar behaviours are encouraged from women towards their husbands also.

The Prophet ﷺ enhanced this message of equality and fair treatment of women by setting a lofty example for mankind to observe and emulate. He demonstrated the importance of taking care of oneself and one's daily needs, instead of imposing on one's wife. Accounts of his life give numerous examples which men of all ages may learn from. He ﷺ attended to his own personal needs, helped his wives in the home, and even stitched and mended his own clothes. He ﷺ demonstrated that a man is never too great to clean and look after his own needs, and he imparted the following advice:

"The best among you is the one who is best to his wife, and I am the best among you to his wife."¹⁷

"The most perfect believers are the best in conduct and the best of you are those who are best to their wives."¹⁸

"Many women have come to the family of Muḥammad complaining about their husbands... Those husbands are not the best of you."¹⁹

"By assisting your wives in their household duties, you will receive a reward of *ṣadaqah* (charity)."²⁰

"A believer must not hate a believing woman; if he dislikes one of her traits, he should be pleased with some of her other traits."²¹

"When a woman breastfeeds, for every gulp of milk (her baby sucks) she will receive a reward as if she had granted life to a being, and when she weans her child, the angels pat her on the back saying, 'Congratulations! All your past sins have been forgiven, now start all over again.'"²²

"O women! Remember that the pious among you will enter Paradise before the pious men."²³

"During pregnancy until the time of childbirth, and until the end of the suckling period, a woman earns a reward similar to that of the person who is guarding the borders of Islam."²⁴

In his famous speech given during his Farewell Pilgrimage, in which he ﷺ reiterated the most important points of Islamic teaching, the Prophet ﷺ reminded the Muslims of the importance of treating women kindly: "O people, fear Allah ﷻ with regard to women..." Once again, men are reminded to remember Allah ﷻ and fear His retribution, for Allah ﷻ is aware of everything that passes between them.

ʿĀ'ishah ؓ reported that when the Prophet ﷺ was at home, he helped with the household chores, treated his

family amicably, and maintained a pleasant atmosphere in the home.

Islamic teachings are very strict in relation to the fair treatment of others. When there is clear physical superiority, Islam allocates more responsibilities to the stronger party. As women are generally physically weaker than men, they are entitled to protection. Any kind of physical abuse is forbidden in Islam, just as psychological abuse is strictly prohibited. A husband is, furthermore, not allowed to disclose his wife's secrets, as the Prophet ﷺ said: "The worst of all people is the one who approaches his wife, enjoys her company, then divulges her secrets."²⁵

Marriage in Islam should comply with the teachings of Islam. It follows that anything permissible within the institution of marriage, including sexual relations, is regarded as a virtue. The Prophet ﷺ once said, "A man will be rewarded for his physical relations with his wife." His listeners, somewhat surprised, asked, "Will a person be rewarded for satisfying his passions?" The Prophet ﷺ replied, "Do you not see that if he were to satisfy his passions in a forbidden manner he would be committing a sin? So if he satisfies himself in a lawful manner, he will be rewarded."²⁶

The importance of the physical side of marriage is also referred to in a Prophetic saying narrated by Imām al-Bukhārī. The Prophet ﷺ is reported to have rebuked one of his Companions who was extreme in his devotion to worship: "O 'Abdullāh, I have been informed that you fast

all day and stand in prayer all night" 'Abdullāh said, "Yes, O Messenger of Allah." He said, "Do not do it. Observe the fast at some times and refrain from fasting at others. Stand in prayer at night, then sleep. Your body has a right over you, your eyes have a right over you and your wife has a right over you."

Islam regards men and women as equal partners who should co-operate in making a harmonious, happy and successful enterprise not only in their home, but also in their community and society at large. Both partners should be loyal, considerate and dependent upon each other. They should work together to overcome any problems or obstacles. They should be jointly concerned with their children's upbringing and education, and work together to meet their children's needs. They should work together to overcome each other's shortcomings, and present a united front to the outside world. They should also provide companionship and comfort to one another.

Certain Qur'ānic references have given rise to much debate concerning women's role, rights and duties. An example is:

... And women shall have rights similar to the rights against them, according to what is equitable; but men have a degree (of advantage) over them. [al-Baqarah 2:228]

There are various points of view as to the significance of the phrase "a degree (of advantage)." Some suggest that it means the qualities of leadership, protection and maintenance. Others favour the idea that it refers to the

tolerance which is expected of man even when his wife errs. Another opinion is that it is man's natural gift to preside over the family and manage any family problems that may arise. However, the consensus of most scholars is that, this 'degree' refers only to the principle of guardianship. In another Qur'ānic verse, it is stated:

Men shall take full care of women with the bounties with which Allah has favoured some of them more abundantly than others, and with what they may spend of their own wealth...
[al-Nisā' 4:34]

Commenting on this verse, Yusuf Ali states that the difference in economic position between the genders makes the man's responsibilities and liabilities a little greater than the woman's. This verse refers to the duty of the husband to maintain his wife, and to a certain physical difference in the nature of the two genders. However, the two are seen as being on equal terms in law, and in certain matters the physically 'weaker' sex is entitled to special protection.²⁷ It should be borne in mind that the Qur'ān offers guidance for all human societies at all times. So Islam seeks to maximise the benefit of all women worldwide.

With reference to the Qur'ānic verse quoted above, the Prophetic Companion 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās ؓ mentioned that as men have been granted such a noble position by Allah ﷻ, they should exercise greater patience toward their womenfolk. If there is some deficiency in one's wife, the husband is enjoined to accommodate her weaknesses, maintain a patient attitude toward her and be consistent

in discharging his rights and duties. In short, marriage is intended to bring benefit to both partners.

A renowned Asian scholar, Hazrat Hakim Akhtar Saheb states: "The rights of women have been mentioned before those of men in this verse because man, due to his inherent (physical) power and strength, can easily obtain his rights... Thus Allah ﷻ placed more emphasis upon the rights of women who cannot forcibly obtain their rights (easily)."²⁸ The second point that may be noted from this Qur'ānic verse is that a man should take the initiative in fulfilling his responsibilities because the Qur'ān has mentioned women's rights first.

Sayyid Quṭb states: This advantage is in no way absolute but is contingent, within the present context (which is discussing divorce within Islam) upon the fact that it is the man who initiates the divorce and would therefore have the prerogative to take his wife back, a decision that could not be left to her to take. This advantage, indeed a useful and proper one, is by no means universal, as some have erroneously concluded but is simply dictated by the nature and the circumstances of the dispute (divorce).²⁹

The 'degree above' cannot, and must not, be taken to imply that the male is more worthy than the female. What it does imply is a greater liability and responsibility, which means that men will be subjected to greater questioning in the Hereafter regarding the treatment of their wives and families. The degree in question is nothing more than

a means of assuring the maintenance of women, as and when it is necessary.

Islam clearly recognises the equal potential and ability of the genders, but Allah ﷻ has created human beings in a manner whereby men and women are better suited for different, but complementary, tasks.

Just because the male may perform better at a given task than the female, it does not mean that he is inherently superior to her. Similarly, there are tasks that women excel in above men. There is an error made by many feminists who assume that their emancipation may be achieved by adopting the customary roles of men. Instead of recognising and cherishing their femininity, they seek to mimic men to the detriment of women themselves and society in general. By aspiring to adopt male traits and behaviour, they have further degraded the female while elevating the male. By equating financial earning and the pursuit of a career with power and status, motherhood and the raising of a family have become valueless and deemed degrading. Because unpaid work is seen as worthless, household work is viewed as demeaning drudgery. In contrast, Islam emphasises harmony and mutual dependency. A woman's work in caring for the home and raising her children and family are seen as being just as essential and important as the man's role of earning money in order to support his whole family.

The woman's role is extremely important, perhaps more important than that of men. In Islam, the acts of childbear-

ing and suckling (specifically women's roles) bring immense rewards. Although these abilities are a gift granted by the Creator, women can choose whether or not to breastfeed as a means of earning this reward. Moreover, as her share of the burden of childrearing is greater, from the moment of conception onwards, Allah ﷻ the All-Merciful and All-Wise has made the woman a means by which a child may attain Paradise. There is a strong tradition of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ where he states that Paradise lies at the feet of mothers, thus if a child serves his/her mother then that may be sufficient for his/her to be granted paradise. The hardships and tribulations suffered by women during pregnancy, birth, suckling and childrearing, are not wasted. They bring the promise of reward and a higher status in this world and in the next.

Motherhood

The Prophet ﷺ indicated that a woman's status becomes more superior when she becomes a mother. A man once asked him ﷺ, 'Who deserves the best care from me?' He ﷺ replied, 'Your mother.' The man asked, 'Then who?' He ﷺ replied, 'Your mother.' The man asked, 'Then who?' He ﷺ replied, 'Your mother.' The man asked, 'Then who?' He ﷺ replied, 'Then your father.'³⁰ Thus, a mother is given a position three times greater than a father as a reflection on her sacrifices and hardships.

Islam teaches the preciousness of the female at every stage of her life. The duty of a believing Muslim is to live his or her life in accordance with Islamic teachings in order

to please the Creator. If Allah ﷻ is pleased with a person, they will benefit in this life and also in the life to come. In order to please Allah ﷻ, Muslims must follow His commandments. Among His commands is to be kind and just towards women, whether they are daughters, sisters, wives or mothers.

And We have enjoined on man (to be good) to his parents: His mother bore him in weakness upon weakness and his weaning lasted two years. We therefore enjoined upon him: Give thanks to Me and your parents. To Me is your ultimate return [Luqmān 31:14]

Miqdām ؓ reported that the Prophet ﷺ said: "Listen, O people: Allah the Most High commands you to treat your mothers well. Allah the Most High commands you to be good to your mothers, and thereafter to your fathers."³¹ Anas ؓ reported that the Prophet ﷺ said: "Paradise lies at the feet of mothers." By pleasing his mother and attending to her needs, a Muslim can gain Allah's pleasure and enter Paradise. This is the case whether one's mother is a Muslim or not.

Islam inculcates ethical and moral standards for children towards their parents and in particular the mother. There is a responsibility imposed upon children to provide parents with security in their old age, treat them with kindness, compassion and reverence. The Qur'ānic word encompassing the child's role is *iḥsān* which means, in a nutshell, doing all that is good and beautiful. Children are also expected to support and maintain their parents as

and when the need arises. It is incumbent upon children to ensure the well-being of their parents at the time of their need and in particular during old age. The Qur'ān is explicit about the respect and honouring of parents:

"Your Lord hath decreed that you worship none but Him, and that you be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them, but address them in terms of honour. And out of kindness, lower to them the wing of humility, and say: 'My Lord! Bestow on them Your Mercy as they did raise me up when I was young'" [al-Isrā', 17:23-24].

"We have enjoined on man and woman kindness to parents; but if they (either of them) strive (to force) you to join with Me anything of which you have no knowledge, obey them not" [al-'Ankabūt, 29:8].

"We have enjoined on man and woman (to be good) to his/her parents; show gratitude to Me and to your parents; to Me is (your final) Goal. If they (parents) strive to make you join in worship with Me things of which you have no knowledge, obey them not; yet bear them company in this life with justice (and consideration) and follow the way of those who turn to Me (in love)" [Luqmān, 31:14-15].

Obligations to parents do not cease when they die, as the following *ḥadīth* indicates. Abū Usayd Sa'īdī ؓ said, "We were once sitting with the Prophet ﷺ when a man from the tribe of Salamah came and said to him: 'O Messenger of Allah! Do my parents have rights over me even after they die?' The Prophet ﷺ replied, 'Yes. You must pray to Allah

to bless them with His forgiveness and mercy, fulfil the promises they made to anyone, and respect their relations and their friends'."32

Polygyny³³

One of the strongest criticisms levelled against Islam is the fact that it allows men to have more than one wife (polygyny). This is flagged up as proof that this religion subjugates, exploits and degrades women. This has played well in stereotyping Muslim men as misogynists and Muslim women as subservient, oppressed and downtrodden.

There would be few who would argue against the fact that historically speaking, the Islamic ruling on polygamy had a positive impact on the society of the time as it reduced the number of wives a man could have to four, at a time when it was the norm for men to marry many women at any one time. The Islamic regulation of polygyny also imposed strict conditions on men who did have more than one wife, requiring them to treat them equally in all material and physical senses. All wives are entitled to equal housing, provision and time commitments from their husband.

In modern Western societies, polygyny is not accepted as society follows the strong Christian tradition of monogamy. However, this does not and has arguably never meant that men were faithful to just one woman. In societies where extra-marital affairs are fairly common, one is forced to ask which is better, a covert relationship that is likely to hurt all parties involved or open relationships where all parties

have rights and responsibilities and know exactly where they stand.

Islam did not abolish polygyny, as it recognises that in some cases polygyny might be necessary and even preferable. However, the idea that the *Shari'ah* sanctions the male's sexual indulgence at the expense of women is absolutely false. Polygyny has not been sanctioned for the gratification of male desires but rather as a proviso for 'situations of emergency'.³⁴ The initial intention of this law was to bring some order to the people of Arabia and neighbouring societies who had been accustomed to an unlimited number of wives, and to inaugurate a system that would take care of the needs of women. Polygyny also sought to solve the problem of the existence of large numbers of widows and orphans who were left to fend for themselves after warfare. At a time when women needed the protection of men in order to survive, polygyny ensured that they were cared for within the confines of a family.

If you fear that you will not be able to deal justly with the orphans, 'marry women of your choice, two, or three, or four; but if you fear that you will not be able to deal justly (with them), then only one, or (a captive) that your right hands possess. That will be more suitable, to prevent you from doing injustice. [al-Nisā' 4:3]

The circumstance in which this Qur'ānic verse was revealed illustrates the true purpose of Islam with regards to polygyny. It was revealed after the battle of Uhud, in which a significant number of Muslim men were killed and

many women were left widowed and children orphaned. To safeguard the new Muslim community, this just and compassionate law was revealed in order to ensure that women were looked after.

Regarding the verse from the Qur'ān quoted above, 'Ā'ishah رضي الله عنها stated that when men married orphan girls under their guardianship, prior to Islam, they tended to do so to acquire their property or because they would not be held to account if they mistreated them, as they had no one to protect them. It is in this context that men were advised to marry other women to avoid being unjust to orphans. This interpretation is supported by verse 4:127:

"They ask you to pronounce laws concerning women, say: Allah pronounces to you concerning them, and reminds you of the injunctions which were recited to you in the Book about female orphans whom you do not give what has been ordained for them and whom you wish to marry (out of greed) and the commandments relating to the children who are weak and helpless. Allah directs you to treat the orphans with justice. Allah is well aware of whatever you do."

Islam requires men to take full care of the orphans' interests and property, but it advises those men who feel that they could not do justice to them as custodians not to marry them, but instead to marry other women, up to a maximum of four. Ibn 'Abbās رضي الله عنه, a great scholar of Islam and a Companion of the Prophet ﷺ, stated that there was, during the pre-Islamic period, no limit on the number of wives a man could take. The result was that

a man sometimes married as many as ten women and when expenses increased, he encroached on the rights of orphans under his custody. It was in this context that Allah ﷻ fixed the limit to four wives and instructed the Muslims to marry up to four wives provided they possessed the capacity to treat them equitably. Sa'īd ibn Jubayr and Qatādah emphasised that the Arabs in the pre-Islamic period had some consideration for orphans but not much for wives and hence they married them and subjected them to injustice and oppression. It is in this context that mankind was warned against being unjust to orphans and equally warned against being unjust to women they marry. Although verse 4:3 is scrutinised for allowing polygyny, its real emphasis is on justice for orphans and women.

The Qur'ānic injunction to any man who wishes to marry a second wife is that he has to treat all his wives fairly. The verse quoted above includes the command to treat wives equally, and anyone who is unable to do so should marry only one wife. Equal treatment relates to all social, economical and physical needs. However, the extent of this equality between wives is thought to exclude a man's feelings of love towards his wives, as it may not be possible for him to love them equally, a fact which is recognised by the Qur'ān:

You are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire: but turn not away (from a woman) altogether, so as to leave her (as it were) hanging (in the air)...
[al-Nisā' 4:129]

A renowned Pakistani scholar, Mufti Taqi Usmani, suggests that as equality in all aspects of one's dealings with one's wives is impossible, a man should do justice as much as is humanly possible. He should not be excessively inclined towards one wife.³⁵ The Prophet ﷺ urged fair treatments of co-wives when he said: "A man who marries more than one woman and then does not deal justly with them will be resurrected with half his faculties out of function."³⁶ Thus, despite the recognition that a man may not have the same feelings towards all of his wives, this should not impact on his treatment of them, and none of them should be favoured to the detriment of any of the others.

It is worth noting that some Muslim 'modernists' have linked the two Qur'ānic verses quoted above and drawn the conclusion that Islam effectively prohibits polygyny. Since the verse 4:3 states '*...but if you fear that you will not be able to deal justly (with them), then (marry) only one*' and *al-Nisā'* 4:129 states that it is not possible to treat two women equally, some conclude that men who marry more than one woman are therefore acting against the Islamic teachings. Unfortunately this is an erroneous conclusion and the following points need to be considered:

1. The equal treatment referred to is only that which is humanly possible. A man may be emotionally more inclined to one wife, but he is not allowed to make this fact obvious, and he must always ensure that his wives are taken care of equitably. If a husband feels a greater attraction to one wife, or if one wife is more satisfied

by her husband than the other, then this is beyond the man's control, provided that the husband does not show his preference to one of his wives in that which he can control. 'Ā'ishah reported that the Prophet ﷺ used to distribute things and do justice to all his wives. He used to say, "My Lord, this is my distribution of what is in my control but I have no responsibility for what is in Your control and over which I have no control."³⁷ Here, '*What is in Your control*' refers to matters of the heart.

2. On no occasion did the Prophet ﷺ forbid his Companions to marry more than one wife. In the case of men who had more than four wives when they embraced Islam, such as Ghaylān ibn Umayyah al-Thaqafi, the Prophet ﷺ asked them to keep four wives and to release the others.
3. The Qur'ānic injunction "*You are never able to be fair and just as between women, even if it is your ardent desire*" has been followed by a directive "*...you incline not wholly to one leaving the other (as it were) hanging (in the air)...*". Since the injunction is followed by a directive, it follows that there is no room for inferring from this that polygyny is prohibited.

It is interesting to note that polygyny began to be questioned by some Muslims during the emergence of European colonialism. The Arab world from the mid 1950s started legislating against polygyny, beginning with Syria under the French influence in 1953 and followed, a few years later, by Tunisia, Morocco and Iraq.

Polygyny, however, is the exception rather than the norm in Muslim societies throughout the World. A World Health Organisation census has shown that less than 5 percent of Muslim men practise polygyny. This is in contrast to countries such as India, where 15.25% of men from tribal religious groups practise polygyny; 7.97% of Buddhists, 6.72% of Jains and 5.8% of Hindus have more than one wife. The percentage of polygynous marriages in India is lowest among Muslims, at 5.7 percent.³⁸

These figures give an indication of the level of misinformation and stereotyping perpetrated by the Western media. The abhorrence with which some non-Muslims view polygyny is to be contrasted with their attitude to adultery. Regarding President Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky, a Time-CNN poll indicated that 50 percent thought that the President's behaviour is "about the same as the average married man." While 35% think that adultery should be a crime, 61% think it should not. Although the exact figures for adultery are difficult to ascertain, the Family Relations Magazine in 2005 reported that Vaughan, author of *The Monogamy Myth*, conservatively estimates that about 60% of married men and 40% of married women will have an affair at some time during their marriage. Maggie Scarf, author of *Intimate Partners*, basically agrees.³⁹

Since the above books were written more than a decade ago and since more women are leaving the home and entering the workforce, the number of wives having affairs

may also have reached the 60% range.⁴⁰ Even if we are to consider these figures to be highly exaggerated, they are clearly significant when compared to the number of Muslims (approximately 5%) who practise polygyny. Almost everything between consenting adults, including marriage between same sex partners, is tolerated in the West, but polygyny is portrayed as an Islamic heresy.

The topic of polygyny cannot be considered complete without some discussion on the Prophet's ﷺ practice and the historical context in which he and his wives lived. This is a topic which has received much attention from the West, and about which many Muslims are confused. It should be noted that in seventh-century Arabia, adultery, rape and fornication were the norm. Men could have as many wives as they wanted, with no obligation to care for them or attend to their needs as human beings. In this environment, the Prophet ﷺ remained chaste from the beginning. At the age of 25, he married Khadijah ؓ, who was a forty-year old widow and his senior by fifteen years. Their marriage was a happy and harmonious one, and remained so until Khadijah ؓ passed away some 25 years later. By this time the Prophet ﷺ was 50 years of age.

The Prophet's ﷺ second wife was Sawdah ؓ. She and her first husband had been among the earliest converts to Islam. They suffered great hardship at the hands of the Quraysh, so the Prophet ﷺ instructed them to migrate to Abyssinia (Ethiopia). Upon the death of her husband in Abyssinia, Sawdah ؓ suffered much as a widow in a foreign land. The

Prophet ﷺ knew that he was responsible for the welfare of his followers, so he proposed marriage to Sawdah. This marriage brought relief, respect and status to her, and provided the Prophet ﷺ with companionship and assistance in raising his children from his marriage to Khadijah. At the time of her marriage to the Prophet ﷺ, Sawdah was around 55 years old.

In order to create blood ties and to show his love and respect to his closest Companions who had given up so much of their wealth and comforts in this world for the sake of Islam, the Prophet ﷺ gave two of his daughters in marriage to 'Alī and 'Uthmān. He also accepted in marriage 'Ā'ishah and Ḥafṣah, the daughters of Abū Bakr and 'Umar, respectively. His marriage to these two noble women enhanced his close ties with his Companions. Moreover, these women were later to offer deep insight into the Prophet's life. They were responsible for narrating over half of the Prophetic traditions which now form the basis of the Islamic code of conduct. 'Ā'ishah alone is known to have narrated over two thousand Prophetic traditions.

Zaynab was a cousin of the Prophet. She had previously been married to Zayd, the freed slave and adopted son of the Prophet. This marriage had been arranged by the Prophet, but the couple were never happy in their marriage and it became apparent that they were not compatible. At the Prophet's insistence, they had stayed together for several years, but in the end

Zayd could not tolerate it any longer, and decided to set Zaynab free from their marriage contract. The fact that an ex-slave had divorced a woman of the noble Quraysh tribe became the subject of much gossip among the pagans and the weaker members of the Muslim community. Not surprisingly, Zaynab confined herself to her quarters and it fell to the Prophet to relieve her of her misery. He married her, and she was around 38 years of age at the time. This action achieved two ends. First, the fact that the Prophet arranged the marriage of Zaynab to a slave was to demonstrate that Islam makes no distinction between classes, race or status, as the Qur'ān teaches that the noblest person in the sight of Allah is the one who is most pious. The second, was to indicate that adopted sons were not to be counted as blood relatives, as had previously been the custom in Arabia.

...Nor has He [Allah] made your adopted sons your sons. Such is (only) your (manner of) speech by your mouths. But Allah tells (you) the Truth and He shows the (right) Way. [al-Aḥzāb 33:4]

In order to unite the tribes of Arabia under Islam, it was deemed necessary to have blood ties with them, which could be accomplished through marriage. Hence some of the Prophet's marriages were arranged to establish inter-tribal ties and to further the cause of unity. The Prophet's marriage to Juwayriyah resulted in the freeing of all the prisoners captured by the Muslims, the Banū al-Muṣṭaliq who were among the fiercest enemies of Islam. The whole tribe later embraced Islam. Maymūnah came from the

tribe of Najd, who had murdered the emissaries sent to them by the Prophet ﷺ. After his marriage to Maymūnah ؓ, however, their attitude changed and Najd became favourable towards Islam.

The Prophet ﷺ had eleven wives in all, of whom two – Khadījah ؓ and Zaynab ؓ – passed away in his own lifetime. After the verse which restricted the number of wives to four was revealed, he contracted no further marriages, but his nine remaining wives were regarded as ‘mothers of the faithful’ and as no other man would be permitted to marry them if he divorced them, he kept all his wives on the grounds of compassion.

With the exception of ‘Ā’ishah ؓ, all of his wives were widows or divorcees. His marriages were all for political reasons or were contracted in order to set an example of compassion, as in the cases of Zaynab ؓ and Sawdah ؓ. All his marriages took place late in his life, from the age of 55 onward. The Prophet ﷺ was in a position of great political power. He could have taken advantage of his position to obtain all the worldly comforts and carnal pleasures had he wished to do so. But he chose to marry widows and older women – a sure indication of his upright moral character and desire to set the highest example to his followers.

Divorce

The Prophet ﷺ said: “Divorce is the most hateful of all lawful things in the sight of Allah.”⁴¹

Although Islam emphasises the importance of marriage, it is a humane and practical religion, mindful of human nature, and recognises the fact that there may be situations in which dissolving the marriage bond may be in the interests of the individuals concerned and of society at large. Divorce is allowed as a last resort. If divorce was not allowed, animosity and adultery would have become rampant. To save individuals and society from greater evils, divorce has been permitted. However, it is not a step to be taken lightly or hastily. Sincere attempts at reconciliation are to be made first and – as in the case of marriage – the rights and welfare of women are to be upheld.

Imām al-Ghazālī (b.1058 CE) stated that the greatest care should be taken to avoid divorce as although it is permissible, Allah ﷻ disapproves of it. If divorce becomes necessary, then the woman should be divorced kindly, not through anger or contempt, and not without a valid reason. After divorce, a man is forbidden from divulging the shortcomings of his ex-wife.⁴²

The Qur’ān advises couples who are facing difficulties in their marriages to appoint arbiters:

If you fear a breach between them twain, appoint (two) arbiters, one from his family and the other from hers; if they wish for peace, Allah will cause their reconciliation... [al-Nisā’ 4:35]

But if reconciliation fails, then the couple are permitted to separate:

But if they disagree (and must part), Allah will provide abundance for all from His All-Reaching bounty... [al-Nisā' 4:130]

In order to dissolve a marriage, it is essential to pronounce a declaration of divorce (*ṭalāq*). There are three types of divorce in Islam:

1. *Ṭalāq aḥsan* (the preferable type of divorce): After issuing one pronouncement of divorce, the couple undergo the waiting period (*'iddah*) of three menstrual cycles. During this time, all possible attempts at reconciliation should be made. The husband may take his wife back at any time during this period. In this period, the man must either keep his wife at home or at least furnish her with a comfortable home, which is easily accessible to him. Further, the man must provide for her as if no divorce has taken place. If reconciliation fails by the end of the waiting period, the marriage is broken.
2. *Ṭalāq ḥasan* - is a divorce where a man divorces his wife in three consecutive states of purity.
3. *Ṭalāq bid'ī* (blameworthy innovative divorce) is a divorce whereby the husband issues three pronouncements of divorce at one time. According to the majority of jurists, this form of divorce is valid but it is against the spirit of the *Shari'ah* and so the man is a sinner in the eyes of the Sacred Law.

This last form of divorce is considered a serious infringement on the Islamic teachings. 'Umar ؓ, a close Compan-

ion of the Prophet ﷺ and the second Caliph of Islam, used to whip anyone who divorced his wife thrice at one and the same sitting.

When you divorce women, and they fulfil the term of their ('Iddah), either take them back on equitable terms or set them free on equitable terms; but do not take them back to injure them, (or) to take undue advantage; if any one does that, he wrongs his own soul. Do not treat Allah's Signs as a jest, but solemnly rehearse Allah's favours on you, and the fact that He sent down to you the Book and Wisdom, for your instruction. And fear Allah, and know that Allah is well-acquainted with all things. [al-Baqarah, 2:231]

During the waiting period, the couple should stay in the same home, which gives greater opportunity for reconciliation. The woman cannot be evicted from the marital home unless she has committed an indecent act, such as adultery.

... And fear Allah, your Lord: and turn them not out of their houses, nor shall they (themselves) leave, except in case they are guilty of some open lewdness, those are limits set by Allah: and any who transgresses the limits of Allah, does verily wrong his (own) soul: you know not if perchance Allah will bring about thereafter some new situation. [al-Ṭalāq 65:1]

When it comes to divorce, Islam treads the middle ground while safeguarding the rights of women. It does not prohibit divorce, thereby keeping women prisoners, nor does it regard divorce as insignificant, as in pre-Islamic Arabia and as it seems to be evolving into at the present time.

The right to divorce is not restricted to the husband. The woman may also seek the annulment of the marriage by means of a process known as *faskh*, whereby she applies to the Judge (*Qāḍī*) for an annulment of the marriage. The wife may seek the annulment of marriage for many reasons, including apostasy (renunciation of Islam) by the husband; lack of equality of status (*kafā'ah*); lack of compatibility; spoiling of marriage (*fasād*); incurable impotence on the part of the husband and if the husband mistreats his wife. The above cases present valid grounds for a woman to seek divorce from her husband.

If the wife fears cruelty or desertion on her husband's part, there is no blame on them if they arrange an amicable settlement between themselves; and such settlement is best... [al-Nisā' 4:128]

Islam has decreed justice for both genders in the case of divorce. Although the act of divorce is disliked, it is permitted to cater for human weakness.

Modesty

Modesty refers to the avoidance of any excesses and the presentation of an unpretentious appearance. This is the way of life taught by the Qur'ān and exemplified by the Prophet ﷺ.

According to Islam, one of the worst crimes after the murder of innocent people is adultery (*zinā*), and the

punishment dictated by Islam for adultery is equal to that meted out for murder. This indicates the enormity of illicit sexual conduct and the disgust with which this crime is viewed by Islam.

'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd ؓ reported, "I asked the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, 'What is the greatest sin?' He replied, 'To set up rivals with Allah ﷻ by worshipping others although He alone has created you.' I asked, 'What next?' He said, 'To kill your child out of fear that your child will have to share your food.' I asked, 'What next?' He said, 'To commit adultery with the wife of your neighbour.'"

The reason behind the prohibition of adultery is not because it 'spoil people's fun', but because it is a major cause for greater social problems, upheaval and suffering for individuals, families, societies and nations. It destroys the moral fabric of a person, creates an atmosphere of mistrust and deceit, and leads to the birth of illegitimate children who must bear the stigma of their birth and in most cases the woman has to carry the social and financial burden. Adultery feeds into pornography, prostitution, abortion, divorce and single-parent families. Families are torn apart, exposure to diseases and their spread are increased and people's characters become perverse. The Qur'ān warns us:

Nor come nigh to adultery: for it is a shameful (deed) and an evil, opening the road (to other evils). [al-Isrā', 17:32]

To protect the moral well-being of mankind, Islam lays down laws which restrict, if not stop, the things that may lead to adultery.

Say to the believing men that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty: that will make for greater purity for (Amongst) them: and Allah is well acquainted with all that they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their beauty and ornaments... [al-Nūr, 24:30-31]

The first step on the road to adultery is sight. The Qur'ān addresses the command of lowering the gaze to the men first. Believing men and women are requested to lower their gazes, for the gaze is a gateway to greater sin. The Prophet ﷺ said: "The adultery of the legs is walking towards an unlawful act, the adultery of the hands is touching and patting, and the adultery of the eyes is casting passionate glances at those who are forbidden to you."

Of course one has to look around as one goes about one's daily business, and if one's glance happens to fall upon a person of the opposite gender, there is no sin in that. It is the second glance which is punishable. The Prophet ﷺ advised 'Alī, "O 'Alī, do not allow your first glance to be followed by a second, because the first glance is excused but the second is not."⁴³

In other Prophetic traditions, the Prophet ﷺ warned Muslims against putting themselves into situations where

temptation may overwhelm them and the potential for sin is increased:

"Let no male stranger sit in privacy with a female stranger, for the third among them is Satan."⁴⁴

"Do not go to the houses of women whose husbands are absent."⁴⁵

There are exceptions to this prohibition on looking at members of the opposite gender. In the case of medical examinations or treatment, meeting someone with the intention to possibly marry them, recording evidence or carrying out criminal investigations; the rulings are relaxed somewhat, but proper conduct and modesty must still be adhered to.

In Islam, the free mixing of men and women from the time they become sexually aware to the time they are no longer sexually active is prohibited. On the face of it, this may appear rather harsh, but if we examine the effects of unrestricted contact between men and women, one will appreciate the wisdom behind this restriction.

Islamic modesty encompasses not only behaviour but also dress. Muslims are required to dress modestly and cover themselves adequately in public. The Qur'ān reminds us that after the error committed by Adam and Eve, they became aware of their nudity and shame, so clothing was given as a means of concealing parts of the body:

O children of Adam! We have bestowed raiment upon you to cover your shame, as well as to be an adornment to you. But the raiment of righteousness - that is the best. Such are among the Signs of Allah, that they may receive admonition! [al-A'rāf 7:26]

Hazrat Shah Saheb interprets this Qur'ānic verse as meaning that the enemy (Satan) stripped them of their 'Paradisiacal' garments, after which Allah ﷻ taught them the art of dressing, so that, from then on, they had only to wear the garments of piety.⁴⁶

Muslims are commanded to cover their nudity ('awrah), which in the case of men extends from the navel to the knee, and in the case of women includes the whole body except the face, hands and feet. Muslims are encouraged to wear clothes that are loose-fitting, non-transparent and simple (not ostentatious or gaudy).

Although man's nudity is from the navel to the knee, the practice of the Prophet ﷺ is to wear clothes that cover the whole body from the shoulders to just above the ankles. Nudity, in the Islamic legal parlance, is the minimum area to be covered if a person is too poor to afford more clothes.

The guidance regarding women's dress comes straight from the Qur'ān:

And say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty; that they should not display their

beauty and ornaments except what (must ordinarily) appear thereof; that they should draw their veils over their bosoms and not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women, or the slaves whom their right hands possess, or male servants free of physical needs, or small children who have no sense of the shame of sex; and that they should not strike their feet in order to draw attention to their hidden ornaments. And O Believers! Turn all together towards Allah, that you may attain Bliss. [al-Nūr, 24:31]

O Prophet! Tell your wives and daughters, and the believing women, that they should cast their outer garments over their persons (when abroad): that is most convenient, that they should be known (as such) and not molested. And Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. [al-Aḥzāb, 33:59]

The outer garment (*jilbāb*) is one which covers a person from head to foot. A well-known Prophetic tradition further describes the dress of the Muslim woman: "When a woman reaches the age of maturity, it is not lawful for her to uncover any part of her body except the face and this," and he (the Prophet ﷺ) put his hand on his wrist-joint so as to leave only a little space between the place he gripped and the palm.⁴⁷

Not only do women have to cover themselves in front of men who are strangers to them, but they are also required to lower their gaze, as are men. Umm Salamah ؓ reported

that she and Maymūnah (who were both wives of the Prophet) were with the Prophet when the son of Umm Maktūm, who was blind, came to speak with him. The Prophet told his wives to observe *ḥijāb* in front of the visitor. Umm Salamah said, "O Messenger of Allah, he is a blind man and will not see us." The Prophet said, "He may be blind but you are not, and do you not see him?"⁴⁸

The aims of *ḥijāb* are manifold, and include the objective of restraining individuals of the opposite sex from being attracted to one another. Secondary advantages of the *ḥijāb* include bringing benefit to women by giving them their own distinct identity and their own private space. Women are thus freed from the strain of social pressures in which they are expected to look impeccable and attractive at all times, and are also relieved of the 'necessity' of spending large amounts of time and money in visiting beauty parlours and applying chemicals, lotions, potions and scents. Above all, it allows Muslim women to have the ability to express their personality and be judged on the strength of their intellect and not on how they look or dress.

The Prophet issued a warning that offers food for thought for all: "Those women who appear naked even though they are wearing clothes, who allure and are allured by others, and who walk in a provocative manner, will never enter Paradise, or even smell its fragrance."⁴⁹

Economics

And in no way covet those things in which Allah has bestowed His gifts more freely on some of you than on others: to men is allotted what they earn and to women what they earn: but ask Allah of His bounty. For Allah has full knowledge of all things. [al-Nisā', 4:32]

Through Islam, women gained economic liberation and independence from men. For the first time in human history, the advent of Islam bestowed upon women a legal status as individuals with rights to own wealth. In Islam, a woman could own, manage, inherit, distribute and sell her own property as she pleases and in her own right. Her assets are hers only, and marriage and divorce do not alter this fact. The Islamic ruling and practice with regard to women's economic rights were light-years ahead of any Western equal-rights manifesto.

In the West, the emergence of women in the economic arena was only strengthened during the two world wars when, with most men conscripted for the war effort, the need for labour was so acute that there was no other option but to bring women out of the home. However, it has taken much heartache and a great deal of struggle from women to attain a position where they earn the same amount as man for the same work. However the entrance of women in earning has led to a greater financial commitment from women in the modern family. Women are thus expected

to shoulder the burden of ongoing domestic expenses and, in the case of divorce, a man may claim a share of her savings. In contrast, the Muslim wife is entitled to be supported by her husband, no matter how rich she may be in her own right and when she reaches old age, if she has children, Islam expects them to also care for her. The Muslim woman is relieved of the burden of having to earn a living, but if she chooses to work, she is allowed to dispose of her earnings in whatever manner she chooses.

In the case of inheritance, Muslim women are allotted a share equal to half of that given to their male counterparts. The wealth of the deceased has been apportioned to the heirs according to the will of Allah ﷻ. This re-emphasises mankind's role as custodian of Allah's bounty and he/she will have to account for everything to Allah ﷻ in the hereafter, including how the money was earned and spent. Allah ﷻ has only laid the rules on how two-thirds of the deceased's income is to be distributed, leaving one third to the discretion of the individual as to how it should be distributed. This means parents are obliged to include all of their children in their will, both male and female. There are also occasions when a deceased person fails to write a will and the state or some stronger willed individuals benefit from the deceased's estate instead of the rightful heirs. Under Islam there is in effect a 'ready-made will' under which the heirs' rights are safeguarded and the opportunity of conflict is avoided. The Qur'ān spells out the Islamic injunctions regarding inheritance, and gives women the right to inherit from husbands, fathers and brothers:

Men shall have a share in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind, and women shall have a share in what parents and kinsfolk leave behind; whether it be little or much. It is an appointed share. [al-Nisā', 4:7]

The reason why men are given twice as much as what is given to women is because Islam provides for a social setup in which men are solely responsible for providing for their womenfolk and most, if not all, of their means are expected to go towards keeping their households. Thus, a man's double share or inheritance will be spent on his family. A woman, on the other hand, is entitled to dispose of her share of the inheritance as she wishes, and is under no obligation to support anyone, even herself. Thus, it could be argued that it is the women who benefit from the allotment of inheritance more than the men. However, in the modern age where women no longer enjoy such protection, even in many Muslim dominated communities, it has become prudent for many parents to follow the advice of passing an equitable portion of their assets to the female members of the household during their lifetimes as a gift, if they fear that there will be injustice upon their deaths.

Women in Islam enjoy spiritual equality with men. There are numerous provisions which ensure that women's safety and security are protected and upheld. Rules of conduct and guidelines for dress apply to both genders and are there to ensure that society is just and morality is upheld. The greatest safety and protection is provided by the family, and this family unit is upheld by ensuring that men and women

guard against behaviours that may infringe upon the rights and responsibilities of family members. In an ideal Muslim society, women would be honoured and protected, and freed from the drudgery of being expected to earn a living and chase the impossible vision of a perfect appearance, while also maintaining the perfect household, entertaining their children and looking after their husbands' needs, with no time left for themselves.

Notes

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2. Shabbir Ahmed Usmani, *The Holy Qur'an*, English trans. Mohammad Ashfaq Ahmed, Lucknow: Idārah Ishā'at-e-Dīniyat, 1992.
3. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.
4. http://www.nytimes.com/2007/02/06/health/06seco.html?_r=1&oref=slogin
5. <http://www.geneticsandsociety.org/article.php?id=118>
6. May Allah be pleased with her
7. Siddiqi, Muhammad Zubayr, *Ḥadīth Literature: Its Origin, Development, Special Features & Criticism*, by Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993, p. 120.
8. Ibid, p. 121.
9. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.
10. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.
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13. *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*.
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15. *Mishkāt al-Maṣābīḥ*, trans. James Robson, Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, 1994.
16. Tafsīr Usmani, op. cit., p. 321
17. *Mishkāt al-Maṣābīḥ*, op. cit.
18. Imām Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, Karachi: Idārah Ishā'at. 1985.
19. Imām Abū Zakariyā Yahyā ibn Sharaf an-Nawawī, *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn*, International Islamic Publishers, Karachi, Pub, 1991, p.89 [From *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*].
20. Ibid, p. 90.
21. Ibid., p. 88 [From *Ṣaḥīḥ of Muslim*].
22. Ibid., p.98.
23. Thanvi, Mawlānā Ashraf Alī, *Beheshtī Zewar*, Pub. Zam Zam, Karachi, 1990, p. 695
24. At-Ṭabarānī
25. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*
26. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*
27. Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, op. cit.
28. Bayat, Mufti Zubair, *The Status of Women in Islam*, South Africa: Jet Printers, year 1995, p. 18.
29. Qutb, Sayyid, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, The Islamic Foundation, Markfield, 1999. Vol 1, p. 279.
30. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.
31. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.
32. *Sunan of Abū Dāwūd and Ibn Mājah*
33. Although the word 'polygamy' is the word most commonly used to describe the practice of having more than one wife, the more correct term is 'polygyny.'
34. Qutb, Sayyid, *In the Shade of the Qur'an*, The Islamic Foundation, Markfield, 2005, Vol. 4, p. 37.
35. Tafsīr Usmani.
36. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.
37. *Sunan of Abū Dāwūd, a-Tirmidhī and Al-Nasā'ī*.
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39. <http://familyrelationships.org.uk/2005/09/24/adultery-is-killing-the-american-family>
40. <http://familyrelationships.org.uk/2005/09/24/adultery-is-killing-the-american-family>

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42. Al-Ghazālī, Abū Ḥāmid, *The Alchemy of Happiness*, trans. Claude Field, London: Octagon Press, 1980, p. 103.
43. Al-Tirmidhī.
44. Al-Tirmidhī.
45. Al-Tirmidhī.
46. *The Holy Qur'ān*, trans. Abdul Majid Daryabadi, Darul Ishaat.
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48. *Sunan* of Abū Dāwūd.
49. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.

IV

THE FEMINIST MOVEMENTS

The emergence of the feminist movement in the West was a response to the religious and political oppression of women in western society. Over the last century, the feminist movement has helped women in the West to be heard in the church, obtain the right to vote, obtain equal pay with men in equivalent jobs and be respected as equals to men. All of these achievements were of course positive and changed many lives for the better.

However, the feminists, having attained most of their goals, did not stop at this. At least three features of the feminist movement had controversial impacts. The first was the demonisation of all things that the feminists regarded as behind the oppression of women. Men and religion, therefore, became the enemy. Thus, the feminists made a concerted effort to detach themselves from both. Some feminists went even as far as rejecting the teachings of religion and everything that is conceived as male-orientated. Faith in Allah ﷻ, which was already challenged in the West, suffered a further blow through the feminist movement.

The second aspect was a psychological trap that the feminists walked into. Since the feminists were trying to be equal with men, many began to behave like men so that all the vices associated with the latter now became the preserve of women too.

Finally, in their convoluted understanding of freedom, some feminists began to drop all moral inhibitions to the delight of men. Women in effect trapped themselves in a new form of oppression which had begun in the private homes. Feminism which started out as a straightforward rights movement ended up becoming a quagmire, trapping women in new forms of oppression under the guise of freedom of choice.

The word 'feminism' itself is very subjective and has several definitions, and this has led to a certain measure of confusion. The 'first wave' feminists for example include all those involved actively, in one way or another, in working for the attainment of feminist goals.¹ Other definitions include:

- "A doctrine advocating social and political rights equal to those of men."²
- "Feminism means we seek for women the same opportunities and privileges the society gives to men, or that we assert the distinctive value of womanhood against patriarchal denigration. While these positions need not be mutually exclusive, there is a strong

tendency to make them so. Either we want to be like men or we don't."³

- "The freeing of women from the tyranny of reproduction by every means possible and the diffusion of the child-rearing role to the society as a whole, men as well as women."⁴

Early feminism, which began as a challenge to the Church, the Catholic Church mainly, worked its way to fighting against double standards with regards to sexual morality. What they sought was not for women to become libertines but to hold men accountable for their sexual actions. The emergence of modern feminism (in the West) was a consequence of the contradictions between the ideology regarding women's role and their actual position in society.⁵

Until fairly recently, western political systems were open to men only (and there were restrictions on precisely which men were allowed to take part). Women had no say whatsoever. The suffragettes campaigned for women's rights to vote and participate in the political process.

As late as the nineteenth century, oppressive marriage laws were still restricting women with regard to earnings. In the event of divorce, women were further humiliated by being denied access to their children and being cut off from any source of maintenance. The divorce laws were heavily biased in favour of men.

The development of the textiles industries and the impact of the two world wars drew women out of the home, and the oppression perpetrated by employers, who saw women as cheap labour, led to the emergence of a women's movement that demanded equal pay and fair treatment. The struggle for equal pay lasted until 1975, when a law was finally passed in Britain. However, as women are still being exploited in the workplace, it is rare, even today, to see women at the top of many institutes, companies and organisations. The struggle is clearly not over yet.

The feminist movement has become an academic quagmire which has spawned nearly a dozen schools of thought. The most prominent of these include the Marxist (or Socialist), Liberal, Radical and Sexual feminism.

Marxist Feminism

The Socialist or Marxist tradition has its roots in the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. However, the idea of socialism pre-dates both, and had already been in circulation among philosophers, economists and politicians. The thought of Marx and Engels is exemplified in the following quotation:

"As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce. Hence what individuals are depends on the material conditions of their production."⁶

Marx's concept of labour and value may be summarised as follows: The value and power of labour contained within a certain product can be realised only if others want the commodity, i.e. if it has an exchange value in the marketplace. In return for such productive labour, the worker receives a wage, which has within it two components: a measure of profit or the surplus value appropriated by the capitalist; and the product of necessary labour used by the workers to sustain themselves, their family and the next generation.⁷ Marx's depiction of capitalism includes a further class, a group which is only tenuously linked to the production process at any given time: the unemployed, immigrant workers, and *women* (emphasis added). This group comprises components of the reserve army of labour ready to be mobilised when production needs to be expanded rapidly, and then demobilised during times of recession.⁸

The Marxist theory emphasises the idea that what makes us human is the fact that we produce our means of subsistence. We are what we are because of what we do or, more specifically, what we do to meet our basic needs in productive activities.⁹ What is distinctive about Marxist feminism is that it invites every woman, whether proletarian or bourgeois, to understand women's oppression not so much as the result of the intentional actions of individuals, but as the product of the political, social and economic structures associated with capitalism.¹⁰

Prior to the introduction of industrial capitalism, the family, or household, was the site of production. Parents,

children and relatives all worked together to produce whatever was needed for the family's survival. Women's work (planting, preserving, canning, cooking, weaving, sewing, childbearing and childrearing) was as essential to the economic activity and success of the family unit as was the work of men. But with industrialisation and the transfer of production from the home to the factory or other public workplace, women – who for the most part did not enter the public workplace (in the beginning at least) – came to be viewed as 'non-productive,' in contrast to 'productive' wage-earning men.¹¹

This is basically Engels' theory of the cause of women's inferior status, which he blamed on the capitalist system, the family and marriage. In order to bring about an end to the oppression of women, Engels proposed the extension of legal equality to women and then introducing them *en masse* to the workplace. Such a move would be a prelude to the alliance of all women with the working class to socialise the means of production, abolish private property, and usher in an age of monogamous sexual love.¹²

It was argued that women's domestic work is an integral part of the capitalist mode of production. It is the 'major contribution to the production and reproduction of the labour power of the collective worker required by capital' and the woman is 'indirectly productive of surplus values and is thereby exploited in the capitalist system'.¹³

What angered Marxist feminists most about women under capitalism was the trivialisation of women's work. Women were increasingly regarded as mere consumers, as if the role of men was to earn wages and that of women was simply to spend them on "the right products of capitalist industry."¹⁴

A prominent Marxist feminist, Benston, concluded that unless a woman is freed from her heavy burden of domestic duty, including child care, her entrance into the workforce will be a step away from, rather than towards, liberation.¹⁵ Marxist women therefore worked towards moving women onto the factory work floor and towards earning a living of their own, as a means of proving independence and equality. Others argued that, in general, males benefit from women's labour and capitalist males benefit twice. Women are the source of all labour in that they are the producers of all labourers. Their labour creates the first commodity, male and female labourers, who in turn create all other commodities and products. Men, as the ruling class, profit from this commodity through its labour. The male capitalist class makes a profit when it buys this labour power and then receives the surplus value of its visible economic production.¹⁶

In *Capitalism, the Family and Personal Life*, Zaretsky¹⁷ provided a detailed Marxist feminist theory regarding public/private conceptualisations. She argued that patriarchal ideology is vital in the reproduction of capitalism and that the illusion of a private sphere wherein one's 'personal

life' is conducted is an integral part of this philosophy. This introduces an entirely new factor: the concept of a personal life, a subjectivity that is self-consciously seeking personal fulfilment. This had not been a factor in the analyses of non-capitalist modes of production. Indeed, one of Zaretsky's arguments is that this search is specific to capitalism.¹⁸

Zaretsky has two main arguments. The first is that the rise of industrial capitalism promoted a new search for personal identity outside the social division of labour. The second is that the expansion of this 'personal life' beyond the workplace created a new basis for women's oppression, since the responsibility for maintaining a refuge from an impersonal society was given to women or at least to wives and mothers.¹⁹

Zaretsky traces the particular process of the proletarianisation of the petty bourgeoisie, which gave rise to a need for a search for personal identity outside the sphere of work. This became increasingly so as capitalism required a rationalised labour process undisturbed by community sentiment, family responsibilities, personal relations and feelings.²⁰

In 1973, Vogel introduced an idea that represented a shift from the original Marxist understanding of domestic work. Vogel wrote: "In short, domestic labour is neither productive nor unproductive... Women's productive activity in the family does not fall under the capitalist mode of production

strictly defined. The common characteristic of women, that of being domestic labourers is significant. Thus women who perform domestic labour form a group whose labour is appropriated in a distinct way in capitalist society, in a mode of production whose social relations differ from those of capitalist production. This means that an autonomous women's movement is necessary to represent the oppression which women share as domestic labourers".²¹

Class, women's domestic duties and insignificant low paying jobs became the bedbug of Marxist feminists and they worked to correct this, at times contradicting each other.

In an article by Dallas Costa, 'The Power of Woman and the Subversion of the Community' (1973), which carried an introduction by Selma James, there is the unorthodox Marxist claim that women's domestic work is productive not in the colloquial sense of being 'useful' but in the strict Marxist sense of creating surplus value.²² No women have to enter the productive labour force, for all women are already in it, even if no one recognises the fact. Women's work is the necessary condition for all other labour, from which in turn, surplus value is extracted. By providing current (and future) workers not only with food and clothes, but also with emotional and domestic comfort, women keep the cogs of the capitalist machine running.²³

Given the view of women's domestic work as productive work, a 'wages for housework' campaign painted a picture

of women who enter the public workplace as carrying a double load which meant that the day started with paid, recognised work on the assembly line and ended with unpaid, unrecognised work at home. The way to end this inequity, suggested Costa and James, is for women to demand wages for housework. They proposed that the state – not individual men (fathers, husbands) – should pay wages to housewives.²⁴

The failure to successfully apply Marxist theories has itself dealt a mortal blow to its theories, for if Marxism truly intended to save women from oppression, then the people of the Eastern bloc countries would not have risen up as they did in the 1980s. The failure of Marxism in Eastern Europe is sufficient proof for the practical application of this ideology. Let us consider the impact of some of these theories on practical issues:

1. Wages for housework is an idea that is neither feasible nor desirable as a strategy for the liberation of women. It is not feasible because if the state pays wages to housewives, it will only do so in a way that preserves its own interests.²⁵ The state would most likely impose a special tax on married men, which would be used to pay wages to their wives. Depending on how large a bite was thus taken out of the husband's income – and there is reason to believe that it would be a hefty sum – the wife's pay cheque would most likely represent nothing more than a rise in status, as there would be no real rise in the family's real income. The housewife's

pay cheque would have the further, undesirable, effect of imprisoning women in the home.²⁶

2. To regard childbirth as the production of people which, in turn, is evaluated as a financial asset is a failure to understand and appreciate the value of human beings. In chapter 3, numerous Qur'ānic verses and Prophetic traditions have been cited which indicate woman's higher status due to her gender and unique ability to give birth and nurture children. Islam has elevated women beyond the narrow, worldly concerns of the workplace and earning a wage, and has decreed that her production and nurturing of children gives her a status that equals, if not exceeds, that of men. If Allah ﷻ and His Prophet ﷺ have told us that the value of a mother is even greater than that of a father, then the status of motherhood must be reinstated to its proper, elevated position.
3. The underlying Marxist theory assumes equality between individuals in terms of financial independence: people are only equal if they earn independently to support themselves. Far from liberating women, Marxism has in fact served the interests of the bosses by supplying them with a surplus of workers which makes it easy for them to demand cheap labour. Real life experience shows that few among those who do get financial independence have gained it by sacrificing their own physical and mental health. However, the majority have become the victims of society rather than its winners.
4. Zaretsky suggests that when the family is seen not only as a haven for men but also as the arena for the

personal fulfilment of fathers and husbands, this can only happen at the expense of mothers and wives. These assumptions need to be examined more closely.²⁷ The idea of a personal sphere playing an oppressive role does conform to present-day experience.

5. Feminists have viewed child-care responsibilities within a family as a basis of oppression. The implications are that there is a need to create communal child care. However, the feminists have undermined those who would choose to take care of their children rather than serve the capitalist system via the office or factory floor. Given a choice between being with their children or in a factory, many women would choose the former. As far as communal living for children is concerned, no feminist programme can start with the presumption that children would not suffer from being left in crèches, no matter how well qualified the crèche staff are. Second, it is quite extraordinary that most feminists, in their preoccupation with proving that crèches are all right for children, entirely overlook the feelings of the mother about it.²⁸

It may be argued that to expect the state or commune to take care of children is absurd. Since parents choose to have children, they should take the responsibility for their upbringing. If we think of children as valued possessions, we should not say that it is unfair that a family of four should live on the same income as a family of two: we should say that one couple chooses to spend its income on children, whilst the other chooses to spend its money on holidays or

furniture.²⁹ There is no justification for expecting the state to care for children.

By demanding financial reward for child care, Marxist feminists have, in effect, become enticed by the capitalist system of reward through money. Since money has become the reward and value for everything, the feminists have lowered women's value by demanding financial compensation for a unique asset for which they should extract respect, honour and dignity.

Marxist feminists remain committed to the core teaching of Engel's 'Origin'. To a greater or lesser degree, they still urge women to enter public industry and they still press for the full socialisation of housework and childcare. What is more, they remain attracted to programs aiming to destroy the family as an economic unit – as a structure serving to bolster the capitalist system.³⁰ They argue that an improvement in the position of women would come along after the socialist revolution,³¹ and for this reason, if no other, the struggle for socialism is given prominence. At the same time, these women find that they can only do so by means of what amounts to a very radical critique of orthodox Marxist views on the position of women.³²

Thus, socialist/Marxist feminists worked towards abolishing the class system and power that emanated from such a system. However, the experience of Eastern European socialist countries undermines this logic. Women under Marxist regimes throughout the world have been the

unfortunate victims of oppression at home, in the workplace and in the educational and political spheres. As far as the liberation of women goes, Marxism has offered nothing more than the illusion of justice.

Liberal Feminism

Modern liberal feminist theories of gender equality are based on the assumption that in order to achieve equal status, all stereotyped social roles of men and women have to be abolished. Conventional women's work roles assign to them the major responsibility for unpaid domestic work, especially child care, and thus handicap them with regard to their occupational roles. Despite the legal rights of women to equality in employment, men use women's actual or presumed domestic handicaps to perpetuate a *de facto* discrimination by forcing women into a small number of occupational roles that are segregated according to labour market types and working time schedules that have lower pay and prestige than comparable male occupations.³³

Liberal feminists seek to create an androgynous individual, where both male and female traits are abolished. If society encouraged everyone to develop both positive masculine and feminine traits, then people would have no more reason to devalue their feminine sides less than their masculine sides. Discrimination on the bases of gender would cease.³⁴

It is obviously quite impossible to create an androgynous individual because of the physical, anatomical, biochemi-

cal and physiological differences between the genders. As Ann Ferguson pointed out, it may not even be desirable for people to be socialised to develop the potential for androgyny. Complete elimination of gender differences raises major legal and economic issues. For example, if a woman is allowed to take six months off work following childbirth, should the 'equal' male not be allowed the same time off to spend time with his new baby? If men and women have the same intellectual capacity and reasoning skills, then surely there is no particular need for female philosophers: men can point out inequities and suggest reforms just as effectively as women.³⁵

Liberal feminists seek to prove that women are as good as men. But we may ask: why is this necessary? Why should women have to be like men before they are deemed equal? The direction taken by liberal feminists is destroying the very essence of what makes women female.

The liberal feminist desire to free women from social, political and legal oppression is commendable but unfortunately it is not only women who suffer. Men, in particular of immigrant origins, carry a larger burden and even 'western man' is marginalised from certain occupations. Hence, the failure of liberal feminists to include in their cause all those who are oppressed is a trait of feminism that has led many to believe feminism as an exclusive club. The roots of this inequity lie in capitalism and its need to seek cheap labour in order to increase returns on investment.

Elshtain, a critic of liberal feminism, states that "there is no way to create real communities out of an aggregate of freely choosing adults." She argues that liberal feminists have over-emphasised the male up to the point of equating masculinity with humanity, manly virtues with human virtues. She argues that liberal feminism has three major flaws: the assumption that women can become like men if they set their minds to it, the notion that all women want to become like men, and the claim that all women should want to become like men and to aspire to masculine values.³⁶

Liberal feminism has a tendency to overestimate the number of women who want to be like men, who want to abandon the role of wife and mother for that of citizen and worker. Any woman whose identity is that of a wife and mother is likely to become angry or depressed when, after years of investing blood, sweat and tears, she is told that being a wife or a mother is a mere role, and a problematic one at that. It is one thing to tell a woman to change her hairstyle, it is another thing altogether to tell her that she should get a more meaningful identity.³⁷

Elshtain thinks that liberal feminists are wrong to advocate that women should reject traditional values. Articles written for women about dressing for success, making it in a man's world, being careful not to cry in public, avoiding intimate friendship, being assertive, and playing hardball serve only to erode what after all may be best about women.³⁸ To assume women must be the same as men to integrate in

the economic and social sphere undermines women. It is and should be possible for a woman to retain her own traits and still be equal with men in the world.

The idea of creating an androgynous individual is alien to most women. There would be very few women who would want to discard their female traits and adopt those of males. In effect, this idea undermines women and works towards feeding into the stereotype that women have inferior qualities which they need to substitute. What should have been a drive to highlight and demand respect for the qualities of women, ended up being something that suppressed them. However, the issue of oppression of others on the basis of their gender or skin colour still needs to be addressed. Equal opportunities and equal pay must be implemented for all, without bias. Laws should be instituted that would guarantee such equality, whilst taking into account any physical differences and ruling in favour of the physically weaker individuals. The Qur'an tells us that Allah ﷻ has assigned to the male his duties and to the female hers. The Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said: "Allah's curse is upon those men who imitate women and those women who imitate men."³⁹

Radical Feminism

The *New York Feminist Manifesto* of 1971 declares:⁴⁰

"Radical feminism recognises the oppression of women as a fundamental political oppression wherein women are categorised as an inferior class based

upon their sex. It is the aim of radical feminism to organise politically to destroy this sex class system. As radical feminists we recognise that we are engaged in a power struggle with men, and that the agent of our oppression is man in so far as he identified with and carries out the supremacy privileges of the male role. For while we realise that the liberation of women will ultimately mean the liberation of men from their destructive role as oppressor, we have no illusions that men will welcome this liberation without struggle. Radical feminism is political because it recognises that a group of individuals - men - have set up institutions throughout society to maintain this power."

Radical, or extreme, feminism regards men as being the source of women's ills; they stress the way in which men benefit from the daily services of their wives for their personal gratification and view this in terms of patriarchy or male dominance.⁴¹ Adrienne Rich suggests that if a woman wants to be a true feminist, she must become a lesbian - doing what comes naturally, thereby freeing her own consciousness from the false idea that she is deviant, abnormal, sick, crazy, or bad because she enjoys sex with women, not men.⁴² A refusal of heterosexuality acts as an underground feminist resistance to patriarchy. In 1979, a paper from the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group titled 'Political Lesbianism: the Case Against Heterosexuality' held as its central message the idea that any woman who is part of a heterosexual couple helps to shore up male supremacy by making its foundations stronger.⁴³

Rich's 'lesbian continuum' proposes that all women are lesbians, insofar as they want to identify with other women.⁴⁴ The astounding claim grips many with concern, since it supposes that women are somehow mentally inferior and have been like cattle drawn towards heterosexual relationship. Radical feminists allege that marriage is at the root of women's subjection to men because through it, men control both a woman's reproduction and her person.⁴⁵ Marriage is thus seen as slavery for women, without the abolition of which freedom for women cannot be won. A prominent feminist philosopher, Simone De Beauvoir, stated regarding marriage, "Women pay for their happiness with their freedom." She insisted that this price is too high for anyone because the kind of contentment, tranquillity and security that marriage offers a woman drains her soul of its capacity for greatness.⁴⁶

The effect of removing men from the scene altogether is not only weakening traditional male/female ties, if not destroying it altogether, but the bond between father and child is eliminated. Meanwhile, the tendency for men to become merely temporary sexual partners and to lose their parental role increases. Instead of making men responsible for and sharing in the duties of nurturing children, women are inadvertently freeing men of all responsibilities, no doubt to the great delight of capricious men.

Radical feminism's main aim is the destruction of patriarchy, which Ruth Bleier defines as: "... the historic system of male dominance, a system committed to the mainte-

nance and reinforcement of male hegemony in all aspects of life – personal and private privilege and power as well as public privilege and power. Its institutions direct and protect the distribution of power and privilege to those who are male, apportioned, however, according to social and economic class and race. Patriarchy takes different forms and develops specific supporting institutions and ideologies during different historical periods and political economies.”⁴⁷ Dale Spender writes, “I have come to accept that a patriarchal society depends in large measure on the experience and values of males being perceived as the only valid frame of reference for society and that it is therefore in patriarchal interests to prevent women from sharing, establishing and asserting their equal, real, valid and different frame of reference, which is the outcome of different experience.”⁴⁸

Gerder Lerner defines patriarchy more clearly: “The system of patriarchy is a historic construct; it has a beginning; it will have an end. Its time seems to have nearly run its course—it no longer serves the needs of men or women and in its inextricable linkage to militarism, hierarchy, and racism, it threatens the very existence of life on earth.”⁴⁹

Hartmann defines patriarchy as “a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence or solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women.” She further argues that “the material base upon which patriarchy rests lies most fundamentally in men’s

control over women’s labour power... [it] does not rest solely on childbearing in the family, but on all the social structures which enable men to control women’s labour. Control is maintained by denying women access to necessary economically productive resources and by restricting women’s sexuality”.⁵⁰

Charlotte Bunch approached radical feminism with social class at the centre of her thoughts, and she wrote: “Women’s oppression is rooted both in the structure of our society, which is patriarchal, and in the sons of patriarchy: capitalism and white supremacy. Patriarchy includes not only male rule but also heterosexual imperialism and sexism; patriarchy led to the development of white supremacy and capitalism. For me, the term patriarchy refers to all these forms of oppression and domination, all of which must be ended before all women will be free.”⁵¹

Arguments from within the feminist group state that absolute separatism from men is neither feasible nor desirable. It is argued by separating, the status quo will be maintained and it is only by confronting patriarchy that you have a chance of destroying it. One of the first radical feminists to gain prominence was Shulamith Firestone, who wrote: “The end goal of feminist revolution must be not just the elimination of male privilege but of the sex distinction itself. Genital differences between human beings would no longer matter culturally. The tyranny of the biological family would be broken and with it the psychology of power.”⁵² Firestone believes that the basis of

women's subordination is the ability to become pregnant. She anticipates enthusiastically the cybernetic society and test-tube babies.⁵³ Firestone states: "the biological family unit has always oppressed women and children".⁵⁴ In this account, the reproductive bond is not even remotely pleasing; it is wretched. Firestone then draws the logical conclusion to such an opinion and proposes freeing women from their long ordeal by means of changes in reproductive technology that would allow women to avoid pregnancy and childbirth - just as is happening now. She calls for, "the freeing of women from the tyranny of reproduction by every means possible and the diffusion of the child-rearing role to the society as a whole, men as well as women"⁵⁵

While some radical feminists, like Firestone, want to free women from biological maternity, there is another version of feminism that wants to free maternity from male domination.⁵⁶ This thesis describes and deplores the transfer of maternity care from women (midwives) to men (male obstetricians) that has occurred in the West over the past century or so. This liberation of maternity from male domination entails the return of childbirth to the care of women themselves, but for many feminists it also includes the progressive removal of the rights and duties of fatherhood.

For some radical feminists the elimination of male domination, if not men altogether, would free the world not only of the oppression of the female by the male but

of oppression itself.⁵⁷ As to how this drastic measure is achieved, this is left to conjecture. However, it is unlikely that those women who have embarked on the path for equality would themselves envisage a means of segregating themselves or destroying one half of the species.

Many feminist theories suggest that men have conditioned women and have taken control over them. The domination of men has been so complete that the male has entered women's souls, making them choose on behalf of men and against their own interests.⁵⁸ There are two sides to this sweeping argument. First, feminists who have entertained this idea are in reality undermining what they value most, the intelligence of women, because this apports blame on women for their inability to see men's action in conditioning women. However, this needs to be clarified by putting the historical context into perspective. Before the advent of the feminist movement in the West, women were confined to roles, positions and structures that were engineered by the architectural patriarchal male to suit the men. However, there were many feminine traits which played to the advantage of women, and the feminists proposed to abandon everything for a vague notion of equality which lacked direction, substance and goal. In this absence, women unconsciously ended up becoming another type of male. The women's movement that began as an attempt to acquire freedom from one type of male domination ended up being entangled in another type of male domination.

Feminists object to the allocation of gender roles, and complain if men and women are expected to do different sorts of work solely on the basis of their sex. But if, like the feminists, we go to the extreme of assuming that we have not rid ourselves of tyranny until men and women are doing the same sort of work, we risk creating a different problem which is forcing them to do the same things although the majority may have the inclination to do different things.⁵⁹ Feminists object to sexism although the majority of people see gender as relevant. When there are fewer women in certain positions on the career ladder, it is the feminists who are quick to point out gender differences.

Firestone's suggestion that reproduction must take place outside of women's bodies before women are liberated is devoid of sense. If any advances in 'test tube' reproduction are made, the technology will no doubt be under the control of males. It is true to say that radical feminism is not practical and would not survive for long if it were implemented: if heterosexuality were halted, this would prevent the production of new generations of people and the human race would come to an end. Some might suggest that children could be produced by means of artificial insemination or cloning. For women to totally succeed in this, they will no doubt be confronted by men, who will rightly fight for their survival. It cannot be envisaged even by the most ardent feminist that the battle of the sexes should lead to war. It is in fact absurd to regard men as the core of evil, because there is no real benefit for men as

a whole in suppressing women. Men have to cohabit with women, and to most sane human beings, male and female, who would prefer to live in peace and harmony with their spouses, the 'battle of the sexes' makes no sense at all.

There is some evidence from researchers that the growth of lesbianism among middle and upper class women in the US and Western Europe was closely connected with the first wave of the women's movement. Marcus Hirschfield claimed that in Germany 10% of feminists were lesbian.⁶⁰ It may be argued that some women have used feminism as a cover to promote their sexual inclination, and some went even further by portraying heterosexual relationships as a cause of female oppression. The idea of same sex relationships is considered to go against the natural biological makeup of humans and is forbidden in the Qur'ān.⁶¹

Would you really approach men in your lusts rather than women? Nay, you are a people (grossly) ignorant! [al-Naml 27:55]

The Qur'ānic view (which, by the way, coincides with that of the Bible, e.g. Leviticus 20:13) is that same sex relationships are an abomination and that those who indulge in them are 'committing excesses'. The philosophical position behind this lies in the fact that those who have diverted on to this path consider sex solely for pleasure. The relationship is not to propagate humanity or build a bond for the nurturing of a new generation and hence this egocentric approach to sex has been proscribed.

Radical feminists who assume that all marital relations are coercive undermine women by implying that they are not capable of taking care of themselves, but need a 'big sister' in an ivory tower to think for them. Radical feminism ends up suppressing women more than men have ever done, by undermining women's intellect, desires and wishes.

Most of those who have examined the development of radical feminism agree that it has been seriously weakened by internal disputes, by its lack of formal structure, and by the inherent weaknesses of its theories. Its heyday was in the late 1960s, but since the 1970s it has fallen into decline with its most committed followers retreating into communes where they could practise no more than a kind of personal redemption.⁶²

Sexual Liberation

Mitchell suggested that women's status and function are jointly determined by their role in production, reproduction and the socialisation of children and sexuality.⁶³ To determine which of these factors most oppress women, Mitchell came to the conclusion that women are making progress only in the area of sexuality. Taken to extremes, sexual liberation becomes merely another form of sexual oppression. The women who were condemned in the past for being 'wanton whores' are celebrated in contemporary society as 'sex experimenters'.⁶⁴ Curiously, a British newspaper report on female converts to Islam asked "Why are British women finding true sexual freedom in Islam?" This sensationalist piece of rhetoric turned out to refer to the

refreshing freedom from the sexual pressure which is so prevalent in Western society.⁶⁵

Not everyone concerned with human liberation welcomed the liberation of sexuality. Marxist philosophers argued that it was a device to distract people from more serious political and economic oppression. Other feminists maintained that the liberation of female sexuality brought a reinforcement of the image of creatures of a separate and powerless sphere. The Victorian stereotype of feminine purity at least had the merit of rendering women special in the eyes of men. In the pursuit of equality and freedom even this dubious moral advantage was lost, and the way was opened for a new and less advantageous stereotype. It was no accident that the most ardent supporters of the 'playboy' style of sexual liberation were men!⁶⁶

Islam finds the whole idea of promoting sex solely and exclusively for pleasure to be totally distasteful, just as many rational individuals who live in the West do. It is also argued by academics that pornography in particular is male-oriented. The most common positions of feminists on pornography, at least in academia, is that pornography is an expression of male culture through which women are commodified and exploited.⁶⁷ For Muslims, however, the sexual act and its inherent pleasures should provide individuals with contentment and with a promise of greater bounties in the life to come so as to appreciate Allah's favours on humans for making the act of procreation an enjoyable one.

The feminist drive towards sexual liberation has had catastrophic consequences on women's social status. The push for women's equality in the West has been accompanied by an increase, among females, in all the vices formerly associated with men. Alcoholism, smoking, gambling and criminal activity have all increased and are now as common among females as they are among males. In early 1996, the female prison population in the UK had increased by 30% more than in the previous year and it has been on the increase ever since standing at 4,460 in 2006.⁶⁸ The Home Office highlighted that the number of female prisoners was rising at a faster rate than the number of male prisoners.⁶⁹

For many women, their new 'freedom' has brought the dismal experiences of exploitation, abandonment by men, abortions, financial hardships, single parenthood and isolation. The sexual liberation movement has resulted in increased social, financial, health and economical hardship. Overall, the greater sexual freedom is being acknowledged as working in favour of men rather than women.

Appraisal

Feminism has had a liberating effect for women in education, politics, employment, law and other spheres of life. However, by the mid 1990s there were claims that a post-feminist era had been ushered in. The assumption was that women had attained all that they needed to attain and were now on equal footing with men. Some commentators

have even insinuated that we might have a male revolt because women have gone too far. What is sidestepped by most commentators is the appearance of a new oppressive reality. Under the new slogan of 'freedom of choice', the ills visiting women are now almost considered self-inflicted.

Chapter 2 highlighted how abortion, rape, and single parent families, all of which have the greatest impact on women, have spiralled out of control, bringing an indescribable calamity upon women. Despite statistics which portray the deplorable picture of women's suffering, it appears that society chooses to be oblivious to the plight of women.

Feminism, in its various ideological brands, suffers from serious problems. It has essentially failed to address issues facing all the women throughout the world. Marxist feminism has ignored the issue of the oppression of women through pornography, prostitution and sexual harassment. Radical feminism has only served the interests of a few middle class women living in western suburbia, and its theories are inherently weak. Sexual feminism has only served to whet male appetites and inadvertently exposed women to the worst forms of oppression. The failure of feminist ideologies to 'truly liberate' women globally comes as no surprise since they only attempt to address the concerns of western affluent societies. More significantly, these ideologies are based on theories which have been devised by humans for humans and, as such, will undoubtedly contain factors that will please some, displease others, and ignore the majority.

The solutions to human problems can only come from the Creator of humans whose teachings can provide true liberty for all of them.

The feminists have succeeded in securing for women laws against sexual discrimination and equal opportunities in the fields of education and work. This is something to celebrate. However, as feminism succeeded in freeing women from the oppression of outmoded laws and domesticity, a more sinister form of oppression, in the form of the tyranny of 'beauty', took over. This phenomenon is described by Naomi Wolf as the 'beauty myth'.

The Tyranny of 'Beauty'

The 'rites' of beauty are able to isolate women so well because it is not yet publicly recognised that the devotees of beauty are trapped in anything more serious than fashion and a private distortion of self-image.⁷⁰ These rites took over women's minds, in the wake of the women's movement, because oppression, like nature, abhors a vacuum. They gave back to women what they had lost when faith in God died in the West.⁷¹ The swift spread of this new 'religion' was ably assisted by the capitalist industries. Now, rather than being assessed on their personal, intellectual and professional merits, women are judged by their physical attributes. This abhorrent attitude is diametrically opposed to Islam, which directs people's attention towards the character of the individual by asking them to base their respect on a person's piety.

The increasing influence of the pornographic industry on the media and internet has resulted in an increase in women being viewed as objects and sex as a spectator sport. The pornography industry was created and is run mostly by men, for men. It depicts women according to what are assumed to be male 'ideals' – skinny with shiny hair, big breasts and a submissive approach to doing anything the man wants. However, this narrow view of male desire does not represent the diverse male population either – and therefore does a disservice to both genders. With the rise of technology, particularly the internet, porn has become much more accessible and widespread, leaking into the mainstream and portraying these unrealistic examples of women as 'normal', natural and, most importantly, ideal.⁷²

According to the BBC, figures released in 2005 show the UK porn industry is worth £1 billion according to the Adult Industry Trade Association and Forbes reports the global porn industry to be worth £30 billion. The BBC cited a study from the University of Pennsylvania which claimed that 70% of internet porn traffic occurs during work hours.⁷³ With the advent of the internet, the pornography industry is now described as a porndemic, because virtually every person is capable of setting up a porn site and, on the receiving end, everyone, irrespective of age, is able to consume it.

In January 2008, a BBC survey found that three-quarters of therapists said excessive use of internet pornography was

the most common cause of sex addiction. Another study in the US found pathological 'pornography distortion' can occur rapidly, especially among teenagers. The study exposed college undergraduates in three groups to varying levels of pornography over six weeks. At the end of the study their attitudes towards women and sexual violence were measured. The group most exposed to pornography in that period – just five hours of videos over six weeks – believed that "rapists deserved milder punishments, that women's liberation was not a good idea [and] they became more callous toward women", significantly more than the groups which had watched less pornography.⁷⁴

Beauty became the currency of exchange and, like money, was highly sought after by women. However, it was more elusive than pound notes or dollar bills, as men kept devaluing the 'currency'. There are no universal standards: 'beauty' is an imaginary idol created by the Western male, who raises and changes its standards at whim, thereby making it impossible for his mother, sister or daughter to attain it. Women's beauty has nothing to do with women: it is all about men's institutions and power. In the West, the man's right to pass judgement on any woman's appearance without himself being subjected to scrutiny goes unquestioned.⁷⁵

As the white middle-class women threw away their aprons and marched out of their front doors in pursuit of liberation, they fell straight into the trap of the capitalist beauty parlour. There are no official statistics for spending on diet

products, but estimates vary from \$40 billion to \$100 billion in the US alone, more than the combined value of the government's budget for health, education and welfare. But concerns are growing that this industry is fuelling our rising obesity levels; after all, it would be a very short-lived business if we all succeeded the first time we tried the products. The diet business has never been in better shape – unlike many of its customers. But with researchers suggesting that 95% of those on diet 'therapy' regain the weight, does the diet industry rely on our failure to make its profits?⁷⁶ While the global cosmetics, toiletries and fragrance industry is worth £6.2 billion, the UK exports £1.85 billion worth of goods and services while importing £1.72 billion. The amount is four times that spent in 2001. Third on the table of high spenders was France with £139 million, while Germany spent £127 million and Spanish consumers paid out £69 million. Overall, Europeans spent a total of £1.227 billion on cosmetic enhancement in 2006, although the figure is far below the whopping £5.678 billion spent in the US.⁷⁷

The consequent burden of oppression borne by women is immense, and the following represent only the tip of the iceberg:

1. The burden of time, effort and money invested by women on appearance outstrip any such demand made upon men.
2. The standards that women are expected to attain are impossible, because the goal posts are constantly being shifted. The media must take the lion's share of the blame for this problem.

3. Like fashion, beauty is ever changing. The impact of this is that most women are kept outside the frame of what is in vogue 'regarding beauty essentials'. Hence, forever the majority of women are kept chasing the unattainable holy grail. The few that reach it only find out that the parameters have been changed, yet again.
4. The fashion industry pressurises women to fight their own natural bodies by undergoing cosmetic surgery, squeezing themselves into tight dresses and skirts, crippling their feet with stiletto heeled shoes and starving themselves into ill-health in the name of dieting.

This is what feminism has ended up delivering, instead of protesting against male demands that women should essentially be sensual and pleasing to men, the end result of the feminist movement has found its greatest support among capitalist, corporate companies and 'playboy'-type men. The demands of the beauty myth are destroying women, morally, psychologically and spiritually. Women need to emancipate themselves from this unjust demand made by a male driven society. In order to achieve this, one needs more than lobbying or government bills. There is a need to revert to a philosophy that frees them from the tyranny of fashion and size-zero figures; a philosophy that appreciates a woman for herself and judges her on her character, and not for her beauty or bank balance; a philosophy that will reinstate her personal identity and self-respect. The sociologist Deborah L. Sheppard writes: "Women perceive themselves and other women to be confronting constantly the dualistic experience of being

feminine and businesslike at the same time while they do not perceive men experiencing the same contradiction."⁷⁸

Women are encouraged by advertisers to wear clothes that express their femininity yet maintain business-like looks. By this they mean women wear clothes that reveal their breasts, thighs and lace-lined lingerie. Women are caught between the conflicting ideals of 'businesslike' and 'feminine', and suffer as a result. Over 75% of women experience harassment that they blame on themselves and their poor control over their appearance. Five studies on the subject have found that "a woman's behaviour is noticed and labelled sexual even if it is not intended as such." Innocent friendly behaviour from women are misinterpreted as sexual.⁷⁹ Women in the US military are more likely to be raped by a male colleague than be killed by an enemy. A report in 2006 showed there were 2,947 reports of sexual assaults in the military in 2006, an increase of 24% in 2005. However, very few of these cases were prosecuted.⁸⁰ In order to curtail such misunderstandings, Islam clearly teaches Muslims to avoid creating or entering into such freely-mixed environments in the first place. There is room to argue that if Islamic standards of dress and conduct are practised, sexual harassment would be curtailed and women would be spared a major source of oppression.

From the 1960s onwards, the fashion industry, with capital growth interest at heart, used the media to manipulate women into thinking that nudity and low weight are an expression of liberation. Between 1968 and 1972, the number

of diet-related articles rose by 70%. Articles on dieting in the popular press soared from 60 in the whole year of 1979 to 66 in the month of January 1980 alone. By 1984, 300 diet books were on the shelves of bookstores. The lucrative 'transfer of guilt' was achieved just in time.⁸¹

Paranoia with weight has begun to appear at a very early age and, consequently, claims many victims. Anorexia and bulimia are overwhelmingly female maladies: between 90% and 95% of sufferers are women. America, which has the greatest number of women who have 'made it' in the male world, also leads the world with regard to rates of female anorexia. The American Anorexia and Bulimia Association states that anorexia and bulimia strike one million American women every year. 150,000 American women die of anorexia annually. Brumberg reports that between 5% and 15% of hospitalised anorexics die during treatment, giving this disease one of the highest fatality rates for mental illness.⁸²

The incidence rate for anorexia in the UK varies dramatically according to the age-gender group. In 2000, the incidence of anorexia diagnosed in primary care was 4.7 per 100,000 of the population. The relative risk for females to males was 12:1; and the highest incidence, 34.6 per 100,000, was found in females aged 10-19. The results for bulimia were very different. The early 1990s showed a marked increase in women aged 10-39, which continued until 1996. Although there was an overall increase in reported cases of bulimia from 1988-2000, the incidence rate has fallen

by 38.9% since this peak. The relative risk of bulimia for females to males was about 18:1. The highest incidence, 35.8 per 100,000, was in females aged 10-19.⁸³

With the fashion industry pushing models to become ever thinner, the impact on society as a whole is fuelled in part by men demanding 'their' women to look like models; and this is spilling over to dangerous levels. The pressure is so great that 3 models gave their lives in order to look the size-zero. In Britain, a public investigation was undertaken to examine how to check this beauty death trap. The death of Luisel Ramos, 22, and her sister, Eliana, 18, within months of each other in 2006 fuelled the debate. Luisel died of heart failure after starving herself for days before a fashion show and Eliana died of a heart attack. The death of Ana Carolina Reston, in November 2006, a Brazilian model aged 21 who lived on a diet of apples and tomatoes, sparked worldwide concern.⁸⁴

In the West, female bodies have become public property and female 'fat' is the subject of intense public debate. Women feel guilty about female fat because they are made to believe that their bodies belong not to them, but to society. Thinness is not a private asceticism but a hunger, a social concession exacted by the community. A cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female subservience.⁸⁵

In a BBC Radio 1 survey conducted in February 2007 of 25,000 people, mostly aged 17 to 34, who were asked how

they felt about their bodies, some 51% of young women stated that they would have surgery to improve their looks and a third of those who are a size 12 thought they were overweight. Almost half the women surveyed said they had skipped a meal to lose weight, while 8% had made themselves sick. Experts on eating disorders said it was "sad but not surprising" that young people felt and acted in such ways.⁸⁶

Women's images in the media and magazines are glamorised by 'retouching' or 'computer imaging' so that a 50-year-old woman looks 30 and a 65-year-old looks 45. Bob Ciano, an art director at *Life* magazine, writes that "no picture of a woman goes un-retouched... Even a well-known older woman who doesn't want to be retouched... We still persist in trying to make her look like she's in her fifties." The effect of this censorship according to Heyn is clear: "by now readers have no idea what a real woman's 60 year-old face looks like in print because it's made to look 45. Worse, 60 year-old readers look in the mirror and think they look too old, because they are comparing themselves to some retouched face smiling back at them from a magazine."⁸⁷ How do the values of the West, which hates censorship and believes in a free exchange of ideas, fit in here?⁸⁸

This issue is not trivial. It is about the most fundamental freedoms: the freedom to imagine one's own future and to be proud of one's life. Airbrushing age from women's faces has the same political echo as making black people

look white: it is condescending, insulting and offensive. To make women look younger, thinner and more curvaceous is to erase women's true identity, worth, power and history. This is the most damaging type of oppression and women in the West are slowly waking up to it.⁸⁹ This is one reason why young educated women in the West have found the teachings of Islam to be so attractive.

It is in the interest of companies that reap wealth from women to make them feel inferior about their bodies. Through the media, which spews out sophisticated adverts, plentiful beautiful people in its programmes and timely debates, the message is subtly but with great influence disseminated on a daily basis. As women spend millions of pounds and hours worldwide on 'beauty' products and go through dangerous and painful procedures to look the way they are 'supposed to' look according to the media, the situation is getting desperate. If women do not wake up to their own worth which Allah ﷻ has favoured them with, beauty and fashion companies, via the media, will continue to exploit them and the problem is going to escalate further.

Young women's oppression is one story, but as women get older their miseries in the modern world simply multiply. Older women not only find themselves poorer, but they are also neglected by the state and by their own children. A culture is emerging where helpless older people are left out of public sight in nursing homes, and young children are kept out of their parents' sight in nurseries and day-care

centres. The West is rapidly moving towards a system where it is only worth living if you are able to fend for yourself in all aspects and spheres. Thus, the value of individuals is only measured in terms of supplying society either with surplus labour or aesthetic value. Hence the young who cannot provide the capitalist economy with surplus value, and the old who are no longer aesthetically pleasing are excluded from mainstream society and locked away in nurseries and old peoples' homes respectively. Old age carries such a stigma in the West that adult children may be reluctant to be seen with their ageing and ailing parents in public. The very parents who nursed them and wiped their bottoms when they had no faculty of reasoning have now become a burden. In contrast, Islam urges those who are strong and in good health to take care of the infirm, and specifically makes it a duty upon the children to take care of their ageing parents and not even to speak to them in a loud or angry voice.

Thy Lord hath decreed that you worship none but Him, and that you be kind to parents. Whether one or both of them attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor repel them but address them, in terms of honour. [Banu Isrā'īl 17: 23]

We have enjoined on man kindness to his parents: In pain did his mother bear him and in pain did she give birth. [al-Aḥqāf, 46: 15]

(see also *Luqmān*, 31:14, quoted earlier and *al-'Ankabūt*, 29:8, *al-Aḥqāf*, 46: 16, 17, 18)

Financial constraint is an added burden in old age which is felt more acutely amongst women. Poverty is a serious concern for older women. Surveys show that about two-thirds of poor older adults in the USA are women. A majority of these women belong to ethnic minorities. In 1992, the median income for older women was \$8,189 in contrast to \$14,748 for older men. Older married women were better off than single women. Older women living alone have five times the rate of poverty of men in the same situation.⁹⁰

Compounded to the financial difficulties is the natural signs of ageing, which are viewed by Western women as a calamity, and women are constantly harangued in the media about the awfulness of wrinkles, grey hair and sagging breasts. In the UK, Transform Cosmetic Surgery Group which is the largest and most popular cosmetic surgery group network with 26 clinics, reported in a press release that 14% of all Transform's Botox patients were over 60 in 2008, an increase of 6% from 2007. Breast implants and breast augmentations for the over 60s increased by 31% between 2007 and 2008; and face lifts for the over 60s increased by 35% between 2007 and 2008.⁹¹

In the USA, the cosmetic-surgery industry – subset of the "luxury healthcare sector" and parent of the "facial aesthetics market" – is now worth between \$12 billion and \$20 billion a year. On March 18, 2008, the *New York Times* reported that the year before, among 18 medical specialty fields, the three that attracted med-school seniors

with the highest medical-board test scores, were the most cosmetically oriented: plastic surgery, dermatology, and otolaryngology⁹²

The impact of feminism on the psychological well-being of women has to be questioned and perhaps it is no great surprise that young girls today are less likely to consider themselves as feminists. Despite the much needed liberation achieved by feminists in the employment, legal, educational and political arenas, it is time women began to recognise some of the calamities facing them today. It is time to attune and recognise the natural order of ageing, shapes/sizes and the nature that the Creator has bestowed humanity with. Food is a bounty from Allah ﷻ for human beings to enjoy. Women's bodies are for themselves, not for public display; and they should stop pandering to society's pleasures and bowing to the *demands* of the fashion industry. Women should bear the signs of ageing with pride, as marks of seniority and wisdom and demand greater respect for it.

... These are the limits ordained by Allah; so do not transgress them. If any do transgress the limits ordained by Allah, such persons wrong (themselves as well as others). [al-Baqarah, 2:229]

Notes

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CONCLUSION

Islam forbids the one thing that modern societies have excelled in: a *laissez-faire* society. In contrast, Islam commends chastity, marriage, reproduction and the upbringing of children, all of which the 'modern, liberated woman' has been encouraged to abandon.

Sex, in Islam, is permitted only within wedlock, a measure which protects women from being used and abused. This also puts sex into its proper context in relation to other human needs such as social comfort, security and companionship. In Islam, sex is an important ingredient for a harmonious, caring and mutually supportive relationship between married couples. It is a means of deepening love, affection and consideration towards one another.

The prominent feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir considered the roles of wife and mother to be a hindrance to women's freedom. However, she was astute enough to realise that a career woman cannot escape the cage of femininity no more than a wife and mother can. Indeed in

some ways the career woman is in a worse situation than the stay-at-home wife and mother because she is at all times and places expected to be and act like a woman. In other words, a career is expected to add to her professional duties those 'duties' implied in her femininity.¹ Many feminists seek to steer women away from marriage and childbearing, as if women were unable to find happiness in these. It is a sign of arrogance on the part of feminists to make such assumptions. Even worse, they contend that those women who have found happiness and security in marriage are only fooling themselves.

After the First World War, there was an increase in literature on female sexuality and premarital sex, which had an effect on society. Whereas previously it was the males who were immoral, women now - instead of demanding moral behaviour from the males - began to follow the male lead in immorality, to the delight of many men. The feminist movement, which supposedly liberated women socially, gave men the greatest pleasure. Not only has feminism allowed men to satisfy themselves sexually, but they are now in a position to demand that women look the way they want them to, based on the fantasy pictures spewed out by the media. The effect of sexual liberation has not been to liberate women. Rather, it has become a snare into which women are trapped for the greater benefit of men's sexual gratification and irresponsibility.

Islam, in contrast, commands people to marry, for marriage is first and foremost an act of piety. Marriage further brings

benefits of emotional and sexual gratification, cohesion between families, and social stability.

And among His Signs is this, that He created for you mates from among yourselves, that you may dwell in tranquillity with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts): verily in that are Signs for those who reflect. [al-Rūm 30:21]

It is He Who created you from a single person, and made his mate of like nature, in order that he might dwell with her (in love)... [al-A'raf 7:189]

And Allah has made for you mates (and companions) of your own nature, and made for you, out of them, sons and daughters and grandchildren, and provided for you sustenance of the best: will they then believe in vain things, and be ungrateful for Allah's favours? [al-Nahl 16:72]

(See also *al-Baqarah*, 2:187; *al-Shūrā*, 42:11; *al-Nisā'*, 4:1)

There are feminists who advocate and eagerly anticipate technological advances that will allow them to replace the woman's role in childbearing. No doubt their wait will be in vain, because even if such technology were to be developed, it would surely be in the hands of men. Instead of becoming liberated, women would be rendered redundant and be placed at the mercy of males.

The feminists see the main causes of women's oppression as being located in the political and legal system, especially the English common law which has its roots in Christianity

(religion in general); marriage, childbearing and the family. Islam's response to these concerns may be summed up as follows:

1. The rise of feminism in the West was due to the high level of social, legal, political and economic suppression of women. The first suffragette movement in Britain was established to address the political and economic inequality suffered by women, especially those who were married. Throughout the twentieth century, women have fought in the home, the workplace and the street for equal legal and political status. Women in Islam, unlike their Western counterparts, did not need to embark upon any such campaign. Every individual in Islam, male or female, is considered to be an independent person who is responsible and accountable for his or her own actions and is answerable only to Allah ﷻ. A Muslim woman has equal status in business; if she commits a crime, her punishment is no more or less than that of a man. If compensation is due to her, she is dealt with on equal terms as another man in a similar case. Marriage does not affect her legal status, her property or earnings, or even her name. Thus the demands of Western women, which have been only partially won after much bitter struggle, were granted to Muslim women fourteen hundred years ago.
2. The feminists' fears surrounding marriage, childbearing and family which are considered as means of oppression have been discussed in the previous chapter. The following points may be noted by way of summary:

- a. Marriage in Islam is a means of obtaining contentment, but if a union is not successful, then the marriage can and should be dissolved. The Qur'ān commends marriage in several places (see *al-Nisā'*, 4:1; *al-Nūr*, 32-33; *al-Rūm*, 30:21). For a Muslim who has freely accepted Islam, and is a sincere believer, marriage entails rights and responsibilities, but is not seen as restrictive. Individuals who enter wedlock must comply with the Qur'ānic injunctions; any failure to do so brings the threat of divine punishment in the Hereafter. Professor Lois Lamya' al-Faruqi listed the following purposes and benefits of marriage:²

- For an individual who has freely submitted to Islam, marriage is an act of piety.
- Marriage is a mechanism for the moral and mutual benefit of controlling sexual behaviour and procreation.
- Marriage provides a stable atmosphere for the rearing of children.
- Marriage ensures crucial economic benefits for women during their childrearing years.
- Marriage provides emotional gratification for both men and women.
- Marriage acts as a protection from sin and as an interdependent institution.

- b. In Islam, children are seen as a bounty from Allah ﷻ, and their birth is a joyous occasion. According to the Prophetic practice, the newborn infant should

be given a good name on the seventh day; his or her head should be shaved and the weight of the hair in gold or silver should be given in charity as a sign of gratitude to Allah ﷻ. It is also recommended to sacrifice a lamb and distribute its meat among the poor. The Qur'ān explicitly states that children should not be seen as a cause for the diminishing of one's wealth or for curtailing one's freedom, and any acts such as abortion or infanticide are strongly condemned. (See *al-An'ām*, 6:140, 150; *al-Isrā'*, 17:31).

Children are considered the apple of our eyes. However, the Qur'ān also warns against becoming unduly proud or investing vanity and false hopes of security in one's children (see *Āl 'Imrān*, 3:14; *al-Anfāl*, 8:28; *al-Tawbah*, 9:69; *al-Kahf*, 18:46; *al-Mu'minūn*, 23:55; *Saba'*, 34:35; *al-Ḥadīd*, 57:20; *al-Taghābun*, 64:15; *al-Qalam*, 68:14).

- c. According to the Islamic view, the family extends beyond the 'nuclear' circle of father, mother and children to include grandparents, uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, and all their offspring. Rather than being a burden and a factor leading to the crushing of women's independence, the extended family should act as a support and means of building confidence. The Qur'ān repeatedly enjoins kind treatment of kinsfolk and orphans (see *al-Baqarah*, 2:177; *al-Anfāl*, 8:41; *al-Nahl*, 16:90; *al-Isrā'*, 17:26).

In the light of the Islamic teachings, some of the advantages of the extended family may be outlined as follows:³

- Family members provide diverse company and intellectual stimulation, which fosters a broad-based environment in which children and adults may grow and develop.
- Family members are there to provide support, sympathy and advice at times of trouble.
- Quarrels may be quickly resolved as family members act as mediators and provide counsel.
- Parenting problems are reduced as different family members assist in childrearing.
- The extended family can assist in matchmaking, thus eliminating any perceived need for 'singles clubs' or marriage agencies.
- Working parents need not feel guilty about leaving their children, as they will be cared for by family members; this provides an ideal support for working women.
- Tragedies such as divorce will not be quite so devastating because the extended family will cushion the blow of divorce somewhat.
- Detrimental behaviour towards oneself or one's marriage will be less likely because the peer group within the extended family will oppose it.

Far from being a burden to women, as the feminists fear, the family is in fact a great asset for modern women.⁴

3. Western women who see religion as the cause of their oppression are diametrically opposed to Muslim women who have seen the teachings of Islam and the way of the Prophet ﷺ as the greatest means of emancipation and attainment of equal status with men.⁵ Islam has given the Muslim woman a status which is far above that to which Western women aspire. So Islam has become a haven for educated women. Muslim women consider their religion to be their greatest friend, not the enemy as their counterparts in other societies see it.

At this point, the practical situation of women in some Muslim societies today needs to be addressed. It is an unfortunate and shameful fact that many rights, granted to Muslim women by Allah ﷻ, have been subsequently denied to them by men. This is largely due to the fact that many Muslim men have embraced Western culture, extracted what suits them, and used this to oppress women. Many girls are denied the opportunity of an education and career; their marriage rights are ignored; their inheritance dues are consumed and their fate in the event of a divorce is deplorable. If those claiming to have faith wish to restore social order - and for Muslims that means Allah's order - then Muslim men, with the aid of competent, sincere Muslim religious scholars, need to implement the whole *Shari'ah* and apply it equally to both males and females. Modesty and the dress-code, along with a thorough education about all the issues involved, need to be implemented and applied to both men and women.

However, even with the shortcomings that exist today in Muslim societies, what Islam has to offer women is far better than any other options open to them. The comments made by Western women who embrace Islam are very interesting. A British researcher, Harfiyah Ball, interviewed a number of new Muslims and reported the following comments:

- "[Before I accepted Islam] I had no feeling of purpose, no sense of direction, proportion, perspective. My life was unsettled, no guidance, no certainty, no proper aim, pointless and empty."
- "Islam has given me all the answers to my questions. I am at home with the universe. I am at peace and content. I have my guiding light to follow - Allah ﷻ. I seek no more than to continue to be guided by Allah ﷻ and to surrender wholly to His will. *This has the effect of ushering one above pomp, idols and intermediaries. You only do what pleases Allah and that frees you from worldly demands.*" (Italics mine).
- "No one seemed to care about the family, friends or strangers. Friendship with people was not close. Emotions were superficial, e.g. relationships with women formed only between boyfriends. I felt pressure from society to leave home and live independently."
- "I was lonely."
- "My girlfriends were always looking for boyfriends; all I wanted was friends."

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Although there have been many improvements in the situation of Western women and the model of the Western liberated woman has been promoted worldwide, many Western women have expressed dissatisfaction about attitudes towards them in their own societies. Women feel that they are expected to fend for themselves, to compete for their survival with men. Their society expects them to be self-sufficient as well as glamorous and domesticated.⁶ Many other pressures in Western society have seen the feminist bandwagon grind to a halt as women come to realise its impracticality and the restrictions it places on women's freedom and happiness. Young intellectual women have found that feminism has failed them, and they are now looking for more prudent, sustainable teachings, such as Islam. Rene Denfeld states: "Feminism is bogged down in an extremist moral and spiritual crusade that has little to do with women's lives and it has climbed out on an academic limb that is all but inaccessible."⁷ Her sentiments are not surprising since surveys in the USA have shown that in 1986, 56% of American women considered themselves to be feminists, whereas by 1992, only 29% described themselves as such.⁸

As the shortcomings of the feminists movement are becoming apparent in the personal lives of women, women in general are waking up and searching for an alternative ethos according to which they conduct their way of life. It is greatly regrettable that after one hundred years of feminist pressure, women's rise in the economic arena has not matched their rise in the social and moral spheres. Women

are made to fend for themselves and their families. Even today, poverty in old age for women is of a greater concern than it is for men. In certain areas of Britain one in three families⁹ are headed by a woman on her own (compared with one in two hundred headed by men alone). Although English women represent 50% of undergraduates, only a negligible few ever reach the top of their careers. The rate of women in the West suffering from mental illness and depression is higher than that of their male counterparts. Further to this is the fact that women in the West are still portrayed as objects of entertainment, valued for their beauty and as workhorses who supply males with sensual gratification and the capitalist system with surplus profit. The Western woman has been *short changed* of her integrity, intellect and personality.

If the feminists are genuinely interested in the emancipation of women within the narrow confines of the economical and political spheres, they need to challenge the present western system by uniting women and men of all races under the umbrella of a logical and sustainable system that can be applied equally across the East/West and North/South divides and address the universal human concerns of child-care, equal opportunities, pregnancy rights, protection and education. Islam offers security, legal and financial freedom, emancipation from sexual and physical harassment, and equality of status. Islam has been portrayed as a misogynist villain in the West, because it threatens the existing social order. Islam faces opposition from parties with vested interests that have a lot to gain from denying

women the expression of their true identity. The greatest tragedy of Western women, especially those in the feminist movement, is their lack of aspiration: they only aspire to be like men, instead of re-evaluating and reclaiming what women are best at. The heritage of women has been devalued by Western men and the capitalist society. It is up to women to look to the principles and way of life that credits them for who they really are.

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Many conflicting narratives exist regarding women in Islam and this subject is the cause of much criticism from the West levelled against Islam as a religion. The discrepancies between Islamic religious discourse and the practice of Muslim communities are often disregarded.

Women in Islam, Challenging Narratives intends to address certain misconceptions about women in Islam and dispel some common myths. At the same time, this book also challenges the accepted narrative that women in modern Western cultures are emancipated.

The chapter titled 'Women in Islam' provides a more accurate representation of the lofty position conferred to women within the Islamic tradition, which is often illusive in Muslim communities around the globe.

A final analysis of feminist discourse scrutinises the impact of the feminist movement on setting new ideals for women that negate their roles within the family and home, and assesses whether this has created greater challenges for women in the modern era.

ISMAIL ADAM PATEL is a writer and a campaigner. He is Chairman and founder of Friends of Al-Aqsa, a UK based NGO dedicated to campaigning for a free Palestine. He has lectured widely on a number of political and social issues affecting Muslims, and has authored books and articles on an array of subjects. He also acts as an advisor for several other organisations including the Conflicts Forum and Clear Conscience. A graduate of the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology, he is an Optometrist by profession.